

# *raisonnE* as interactive archive and virtual research environment

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The *IAINBAXTER&raisonnE* is a prototype electronic collection and virtual exhibition and research environment devoted to the life's work of Canadian Conceptual artist IAIN BAXTER& that seeks to expand and transform the catalogue raisonné format into a collaborative scholarly communications and learning zone. (Yes, the artist's name contains an ampersand—the “and” symbol. As you can see from the BAXTER& work featured above, *Pile of Ands*, the ampersand—a connector symbol that suggests values of interconnectedness and collaboration—has come to take pride of place in the artist's recent work.) Developed in partnership with IAIN BAXTER& and Louise Chance Baxter and in collaboration with an international, interdisciplinary and multi-lingual team of scholars, including Paris-based curator and writer Rose Marie Barrientos, Montréal-based curator Vincent Bonin, Paris-based professor, curator and writer Christophe Domino, Virginia Commonwealth University-based scholar Dennis Durham and Paris-based doctoral candidate Isabelle Hermann as well as York University Libraries, the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) and the Centre for Contemporary Canadian Art (ccca.ca), with significant supporting contributions by Windsor-based visual artist and graphic designer Victor Romao, musician and sound engineer Chris Blaise, consultant Allison Zilli and artist Laura Shintani-Houston, the prototype *raisonnE* breaks with the linear, hierarchical and static structures of traditional catalogues raisonnés by adding content in direct response to the evolving creative, research and teaching needs of a diverse constituency of artists, scholars and students currently researching IAIN BAXTER& and/or the historical transformation of catalogues raisonnés, collections and collecting behaviours. In turn, through a variety of qualitative and some quantitative mechanisms, the *raisonnE* aims to document and evaluate its own emergence in real time through continuous cycles of reflection, planning and action compatible with the principles of action research.

This emphasis on reflective practice is made possible, I should underline from start, by my unique position with York University Libraries in Toronto, Canada, where the resource is also being hosted: as the first W.P. Scott Chair

for Research in e-Librarianship—a rotating, project-based research appointment designed to facilitate innovative, librarian-initiated scholarship and project design—in addition to devoting time toward the planning, execution and evaluation of the *raisonnE*, I am enabled to explore contextual readings which, in turn, enrich all stages of the project’s development by suggesting alternatives to established models of information and library science. This search for alternatives responds to the ethically-motivated work of critical information theorists such as Bernd Carsten Stahl, Gary P. Radford (1998) and Ron Day (1996), who advocate positive (critical, creative, pluralistic and non-proprietary) substitutes for inherited paradigms of information infrastructure, characterized by Alistair Black as “bureaupathic” (425). The unresolved, exploratory framework of the *raisonnE* equally answers the call from Anne Beaulieu and Paul Wouters for “freedom to engage in experiment and play with new forms of research” (58). (As we shall see, this stress on play is consistent with the spirit of IAIN BAXTER’s practice; the artist’s mantra being “Love, Play, Wonder.”)

Responding to current models of user-driven selection in e-librarianship, the *raisonnE*’s mandate of researcher-driver acquisition breaks with traditional collection paradigms grounded in a curatorial logic of selection. With the *raisonnE*, the collection cycle is embedded, alternatively, within emerging conceptualizations of e-research and “ephemeral curating” (Hoffmann), while also drawing upon historical models of collecting and cataloguing that privilege the co-shaping of actor and network (Latour; Pickering). Precedents for the constructivist approach of the *raisonnE*—ranging from the pre-Enlightenment *tableaux de ventes* of the eighteenth-century Parisian art dealer Gersaint (1694-1750) to the “travelling” library of twentieth-century art historian Aby Warburg (1866-1929)—acknowledge the contingency of the archive upon evolving—and even competing—communities of practice and social interests. Just as the non-categorical sales catalogues of Gersaint, according to curator Graham Larkin,

respected the “liberty of the compiler” (84)<sup>1</sup> and Warburg’s performative library responded to “every progress in [the researcher’s] system of thought, every new idea about the inter-relation of facts” (thereby transforming the collection into a mobile laboratory and arena for the performative enactment of the research process (Michaux)), so too the transitional archive of the *raisonnE* is constantly in motion (Saxl, 327). If the earliest catalogues raisonnés—like the contemporary taxonomies of Linnaeus (Eddy; Margócsy)—were imbricated in the workflows of salon and laboratory as well as international (mercantile and scientific) networks of communication and exchange (McClellan), the *raisonnE* is itself a network and a site of information exchange. Above all, the *raisonnE* is a virtual research environment which aims to generate reusable virtual spaces in support of evolving research projects and creative communication through new approaches to data curation and social production predicated on the “total involvement” of contributors and users, such as blogging (McLuhan, n. pag.). Yet this mobilization of new media does not institute a clean break with the past practices of archives. On the contrary—to paraphrase Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan—information technologies facilitate the instant retrieval of historical models at electronic speeds. The community-based production and performative classification characteristic of the earliest catalogues raisonnés are reactivated through instant replay.

Invoking these historical prototypes serves a tactical purpose: they remind us that collaborative design methodologies and models of scholarly communication grounded in notions of “peer production” (Sommerville and Collins) and collaborative authoring are not without precedent. Without thereby retreating to a reactionary stance with respect to new technologies (there is, certainly, something new under the technological sun), adopting an analytical and critical stance “can,” as Beaulieu and Wouters persuasively argue with reference to the Virtual Knowledge Studio (VKS), “diminish the costs of

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<sup>111</sup> “[A]t this level the sense of order is not imposed by the overarching subject categories, but rather by formal and material contingencies—inter-compositional affinities of size, shape, style, tonality, condition, and technique” (Larkin, 100).

hype/unfulfilled promises” (65). Recognizing the historical continuum of technologically-enabled collaborative practices clears a space for reflection within which project participants may explore critically, but also creatively, the multitude of design possibilities—new and old—as well as technologies—“high-” and “low-level” alike—available to archival practitioners today.

In the words of science and technology theorist Bruno Latour, “[i]n order to exit from the postmoderns’ paralysis ... [w]e have to retrace our steps” (67). The historically-sensitive approach of the *IAINBAXTER&raisonnE* treats the futurological rhetoric of some archival and library theorists and practitioners with scepticism. Simultaneously scanning the emerging literature of e-research and exploring past instances of networked scholarship, *raisonnE* developers abandon the modernist conception of temporality as a progressive succession of technological revolutions in favour of the “polytemporal” assemblies authorized by Latour (74). Linear innovation is rejected in favour of multi-directional exploration. This constructivist epistemology—informed by wide-ranging readings in critical theory, critical information studies and science and technology studies—resonates with the arguments of philosopher Jacques Rancière, who counters the breathless claims of “relational aesthetics” by reminding us that “the blurring of boundaries is as old as ‘modernity’ itself” (85). Rancière’s critical approach to questions of innovation, reception and agency insists—contra curator Nicolas Bourriaud’s influential “participational” model—that “spectatorship is not the passivity that has to be turned into activity” (16).

Rancière’s reconfiguration of agency is compatible with reformulations of subjectivity found in the materialist writings of Latour as well as Friedrich Kittler and Andrew Pickering. The machinic assemblages of human and non-human agents studied by Latour, Kittler and Pickering are most powerfully conceived as a “network”: a composite of natural, discursive and social agents which constrain and actively shape the emergence of knowledge. “[A]round machines,” observes Pickering, “we act like machines” (16). I would propose that the network also emerges a powerful tool for re-conceiving archives and libraries as, according to

Marlene Manoff, “we are witnessing [...] an erosion of the distinction of the library and the network” (858).<sup>2</sup> Appropriately, Manoff also argues that “networks [...] reveal the embeddedness of contemporary academic libraries”—the same could be said of archives—“within the larger Web of corporate, business, government, and entertainment culture” (ibid).

The figure of the network provides a productive support for conceptualizing, and responding to, some key features of the emerging regime of e-research; for instance, the “virtual organization,” with its attributes of collaboration-at-a-distance viz. electronic media such as e-mail, instant messaging and video conferencing (Jankowski, 9). As such, the network serves as a material foundation for the *raisonnE* team’s collaborative engagement with new trends in scholarship such as peer production, without thereby succumbing to fantasies of unprecedented and unlimited technological innovation or an unimpeded diffusion of “Big Science” techniques across all disciplines. While responding to another primary feature of e-research—namely, the new prominence of Grid computing architecture—working within a network structure does not limit exploration of new technologies to such “high-level” developments. As Beaulieu and Wouters remind us, successful e-research in the humanities and social sciences requires new amalgams of computational and *non*-computational methodologies (62). In keeping with this logic, parallel trajectories underpin the development of the *raisonnE*: as staff in Library Computing search for plug-ins to further the goals of the project within the open-source parameters of the web publishing platform Omeka, which hosts the *raisonnE*, constant collaboration between researchers and the artist (a classic “phone guy”) is conducted via traditional telephony and in-person, through frequent site visits to his personal archive and studio.



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<sup>2</sup> Radford likewise compares the electronic (archival or library) text to a network (628).



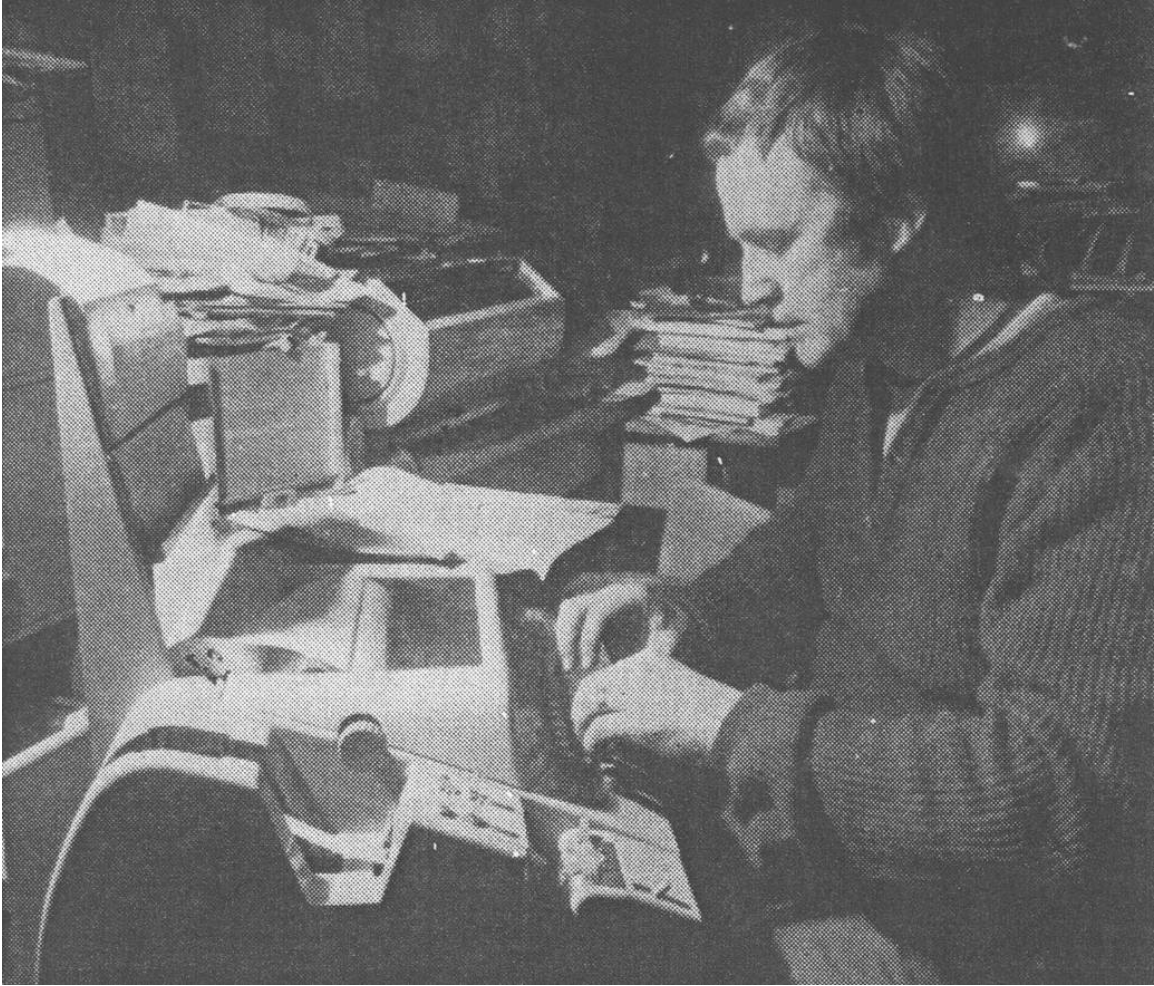
A more recent, but nonetheless historical, example of networked practice informing the development of the *raisonnE* is the “informational” infrastructure of the Vancouver-based Conceptual enterprise N.E. Thing Co. Ltd. founded by IAIN BAXTER& in 1966. The Company, which operated as a legally-incorporated business until 1978, provided a flexible umbrella under which its Co-Presidents—IAIN BAXTER& and his then wife Ingrid Baxter (styling themselves “visual researchers” instead of artists)—were able to simultaneously carry out projects in the worlds of art and commerce. For instance, while exhibiting Company artworks, or “products,” at the Museum of Modern Art in the summer of 1970, the N.E Thing Co.—or NETCO, for short—also participated in the 1970 conferences of the Data Processing Management Association, or DPMA, in Vancouver and Seattle (seen above). This strategy of corporate diversification worked for NETCO because art and business alike were re-inscribed in Company documentation as “visual sensitivity information.”



<b>INFORMATION</b>	N.E. THING CO. LTD. 1419 Avenue Drive North Vancouver B.C. Canada	
	Date <i>1969</i>	Project <i>N.E. THING CO. LTD. LOGO. by ALLAN FLEMING</i>
		Number <i>/.</i>
		
<p>The symbol/symbolotype could only be designed for the N. E. THING CO. It is, in a way, a manufactured found object in one form form and thousands of forms. It asks you to participate in the Company's future in any way you see fit. You can fill it in. You can tell the Company what to see, or do or have. And since the N. E. THING CO. has only a small number of ways in which to present its services to you, the Company will depend upon the environment to duplicate the symbol. Every time you see the dotted leaders on a form—any form—you are all part of the N. E. THING CO.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Designed by ALLAN FLEMING</p> <p>Ce "symbolotype" ne pouvait être dessiné que pour le N. E. THING CO. Si une certaine façon, c'est un objet trouvé manufacturé, une forme parmi des milliers, d'autres formes, qui vous demande de participer comme il vous convient à l'avenir de la Compagnie. Vous pouvez le remplir. Vous pouvez dire à la Compagnie quoi voir, quoi faire, ou quoi avoir. Comme la N. E. THING CO. ne dispose que de peu de façons de vous présenter ses services, la Compagnie compte sur l'environnement pour reproduire le symbole. Chaque fois que vous voyez des lignes pointillées sur un formulaire, quel qu'il soit, vous participez à la N. E. THING CO.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Conçu par ALLAN FLEMING</p>		
PLEASE COMPLETE AND RETURN	Description <i>Canadian, International <del>Business</del> REKNAW DESIGNER ALLAN FLEMING DESIGNED THIS UNIQUE LOGO FOR THE N.E. THING CO. LTD.</i>	
<small>N. E. THING COMPANY LIMITED</small>		

All documentation of Company ventures, such as the Company logo—featured above—designed by iconic Canadian graphic designer Allan Fleming, was “tagged” under the capacious descriptor “information” and filed for future reuse in a flexible archival system without hierarchies. Recalling the information sheets generated by N.E. Thing Co.’s visual researchers, the *raisonnE* aims to develop an infinitely extensible support for a “flat” array of interdisciplinary data.





The N.E. Thing Co.'s pioneering appropriation, as early as 1969, of new telecommunications media, such as Telex and Telecopier, as supports for Conceptual artworks that allowed the Company to infiltrate corporate networks with its Zen koan-like communiqués, stands as a powerful precedent for contemporary research practices of communication-at-a-distance (scholar Tilman Baumgärtel sees NETCO'S telecom activities as an important precedent for the Net art of the 1990s (68)). (Above we see NETCO Co-President IAIN BAXTER sending a 50,000-mile transmission via Telex in 1970, an image that was reproduced in the catalogue of the landmark MoMA exhibition *INFORMATION*.) NETCO's exploration of the potential for information and communications technologies (ICTs) to serve as art media was largely inspired by the visionary




media writings of Marshall McLuhan (who we see portrayed above in a mural at the University of Windsor, where IAIN BAXTER is Professor Emeritus).



This genealogy foregrounds the historicity of the participational paradigm associated with Web 2.0 technologies, since McLuhan famously proclaimed, *in*

the 1960s, that the “world-pool of information” “necessitates great personal involvement and participation” (*Playboy Interview*, n. pag.).

In keeping with the satirical tenor of McLuhan’s studies of new media, IAIN BAXTER’s early adoption of ICTs has always been tempered by a heavy dose of satire that lends his work a profound sense of play (and, at times, of McLuhanesque “inter-play”—among disparate media and environments, etc.) that anticipates recent calls for increased opportunities for “creativity” and “play” in research in face of an impending rapprochement of “Big Science” and the humanities.

<b>INFORMATION</b>		N.E. THING CO. LTD. 1419 Riverside Drive North Vancouver B.C. Canada	
		Date 1967	Project PERFORMING SWIMMING ON DRY LAND.
		Number /	
			
PLEASE COMPLETE AND RETURN	Description	Co. PRESIDENT OF N.E. THING CO. PERFORMING ACT OF SWIMMING ON LAND. ALSO USED AS TECHNIQUE FOR TEACHING NON-VERBAL ART CLASSES.	
N.E. THING COMPANY LIMITED Form No. 8			

Taking the McLuhan-inspired work of NETCO as a springboard, *raisonnE* development is intensely dialogic in orientation (Foster, 2008), emerging through continuous conversations with the artist and other project participants, who act as advisors. (One of the goals of the *raisonnE* project in its current, prototype phase is to lay the groundwork for a more formalized, peer-review editorial structure.) Common goals are negotiated and advanced collaboratively through international email exchanges, telephone conversations and in-person visits with the artist. Some of these dialogues are, furthermore, documented in digital video format and distributed via the project blog (ultimately migrating to the *raisonnE* proper, and sometimes floating off into cyberspace via YouTube and other e-services).



Non-computational formats and methods, such as artist's renderings, also enter the *raisonnE's* trans-computational network. (Below we see an early rendering of *raisonnE* concepts generated by IAIN BAXTER& during a phone conversation with me, which I subsequently documented and incorporated into the project's online << *avant-propos* >> ).





virtual catalogue or database whose contents may be “actualized” (that is, digitized and uploaded to the *raisonnE*) upon request.

The e-Chair thereby acts as a mediator between researchers and the archive. Digitized materials resulting from this dialogical interaction function, on one hand, as a third term between the institution and the researcher.



But, whereas archival materials held by the Art Gallery of Ontario will be digitized according to established institutional practices and in conformity with recognized standards, the artist’s working archive will be documented using less intrusive, ethnographic methods and at every stage in direct collaboration with IAIN BAXTER&. The traces of this mediating activity constitute a new form of electronic publication imbricated in an ongoing process of Action Research.



The *raisonnE* also welcomes user-contributed descriptors of images in its collection as well as user-generated annotations and reflections. Other scholarly and creative contributions and interventions are also welcome, including interviews, essays and reflections. The project is currently accepting proposals; potential contributors are invited to contact the e-Chair for more information on how the *raisonnE* can facilitate their projects. Contributions in French are welcome.



The many partnerships and collaborations which sustain the collaborative development of the *raisonnE* are acknowledged through an innovative

sponsorship page—in the form of a “campground,” which we see above—conceived by IAIN BAXTER& and executed by the Windsor, Ontario-based visual artist and graphic designer Victor Romao (who is also in the process of creating an online graphic novel, documenting the genesis of the *raisonnE*, in collaboration with myself and IAIN BAXTER&).



Exhibition maker Jens Hoffmann’s notion of “ephemeral curating” provides an additional lens through which certain dimensions of *raisonnE* development may be framed (complementing the project’s use of e-research paradigms to frame its networked activity but taking those claims in other directions).

Hoffmann's practice seeks "an equation between archival representations and performative expressions" (253) that parallels some features of the *raisonnE*, including such paratextual elements as the landing page—which we see here—that simultaneously frame and unframe *raisonnE* (dis)contents in a manner recalling Hoffmann's privileging of "process over finished product" (Paling; Hoffmann, 261). *raisonnE* "rEsearch albums"—which permit researchers to share their findings in real time with other project participants and/or the public—and user-generated exhibitions alike resonate with Hoffmann's critical redefinition of the exhibition as an "active space" (261). Hoffmann's maximalist approach to curating suggests affinities with the "more is more" philosophy of Swiss installation artist Thomas Hirschhorn, who serves as the final term in this referential collage.

Borrowing from Hirschhorn's strategy of information overload (as well as "open" philosophies which stress reuse), in its second year (2011-2012), the *raisonnE* will fund an archivist, artist, curator, librarian or scholar to re-curate or re-publish the contents of the prototype *raisonnE* (in all or in part). Compensation is negotiable. Contact me today for more information about this unique opportunity.

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