

Last year, the VAG was showing two different exhibits: “Traffic: Conceptual Art in Canada 1965-1980” and “Ian Wallace: at the intersection of painting and photography”. They make for an interesting pairing.

I wonder what ordinary people make of these two shows. How are these exhibitions of interest to the larger public? Of course, the VAG regularly holds blockbuster exhibitions that are very popular events and attract large crowds. Works that used to be insultingly shocking in their times are now particularly, and perversely, popular. Huge number of calendars and other giftwares are sold. So are the vagaries and fickleness of art! So it is understandable that once in a while, more difficult, less popular and less accessible material be also presented. The VAG has a mandate that transcends entertainment. Its other important role is educational.

Yet the material presently on view in these two shows is particularly recalcitrant. “Traffic” presents us with what are largely the remains of mostly impermanent and de facto obsolete events that took place as far back as 40 years ago. This documentation is very dry and to be blunt, more than a bit boring. I guess if you were directly involved at the times, or even around at the times, as I was, they may trigger memories or engage you with other types of experience. Otherwise, what is to be gained? One has the strong impression, so common in art experiences, of witnessing the obsessions of particular individuals (the artist first, and now the other authorities, the curators). I would go as far as stating that this material could only be of interest to the original artists themselves and now to the curators responsible for its presence at the VAG. It was “curator art” to begin, art made for and often by curators (artists who are not “making” anything but are instead selecting, organizing, documenting and presenting stuff, i.e. “curating”, a very common art practice these days and actually a rather universal phenomenon in art now) and it is still “curator art” now. Those organizing such shows are looking at art through the wrong end of a telescope and they perceive amoebas as galaxies.

You see, none (or very little) of that material was originally meant to be experienced in a gallery or a museum context. Most (if not all) of this material was actually quite critical of institutional contexts and of institutional displays. Yet, in our present time, to be critical has become impossible. Everything has been co-opted and rendered ineffective by the compressive weight of the bulldozer of history and the pressure of conventions and conformity, social or otherwise, here institutional conventions (and conformity). Who would ever dare say that the VAG is wasting the viewer’s time (and money)? That so and so’s work is irrelevant, or that contemporary art has cornered itself into meaninglessness? It has now become impossible to be critical, to present a dissenting opinion, verbally or otherwise, for two very simple reasons: #1- If you do voice a dissenting criticism, you are an imbecile, an ignoramus who cannot possibly understand; you are censored and made voiceless by implied embarrassment if you speak up. So, nobody dares to speak up. The subtlest and most effective forms of censorship are not even noticeable. #2- Nobody really cares about contemporary art, it plays no significant role in culture anymore; artists and curators can do anything they want, it makes absolutely no difference. In fact they could do absolutely nothing (examples of which litter and clutter “Traffic”) and that may in fact be even better. The works in “Traffic” were the initiators of this sorry state of affairs. To their defense, their original spirit of contestation, of openness, of experimentation and play has been

killed by the art bureaucrats who are now taking possession of it. They have been sterilized twice, first through documentation, now through presentation in the neutralizing environment of the gallery. They also have been embalmed in theory and discourse. The other side of #1 is that the art experience has mostly become a social event around ostentatious pretentiousness, where belonging to a select and very exclusive group of refined individuals (all identical) is primary. In such a follower mentality (exhibited by curators just as much as art patrons and more sadly, artists), criticism of any kind is impossible. Dissent even less. Consensus and conformity is not only expected, they are mandatory. We live in conventional times. Everybody agrees who the geniuses are.

Why then do I say such things? They may need to be said, quite simply, if anything is to change. As an artist and an educator, I happen to be crazy enough and possibly naive enough to care about such things. I have nothing to lose, anyway.

“Traffic” presents us with an aseptic, yet self-important experience of utter seriousness, when a lot of the original intentions of the artists were to be funny, certainly ironic, possibly sarcastic, and as I said previously and repeat here, critical. The articles on display feel like nothing less than ancient, shriveled and dried up bits of sacred remnants, to be venerated in their anorexic reliquaries. It is fetishism at its very core. The orthodoxies are spelled out for you in the didactic “writings on the wall”. These works are operating in exact opposition to their original intentions. In that sense, the whole thing is but a futile exercise in pretentiousness (and marketing? Well, maybe not, since we are missing here the usual junk shop to be found at the end of most exhibitions at the VAG! What a relief!). It remains a tired, if largely true cliché that museums and art galleries are cemeteries. Traffic is one of the most morbid art experiences you can possibly have. It can only be of fascination to art vultures, avidly feeding on carrion (a perfectly good definition for a curator, or an art collector, for that matter). At the end of this show, it will all return, where it belongs, to the clichéd trash heap of history.

To put the last nail in this particular coffin and strain the metaphor further in the process, there is no such thing as “Conceptual Art”. This is an invented category, the unimaginative and obfuscating machination of bureaucratic minds. ALL art is conceptual. Like Leonardo da Vinci stated, art is “cosa mentale”, a thing of the mind. The part of any phenomenon that is art is the conceptual part, the rest is mere stuff being pushed around; the original “art” part was when the artist was thinking (often through making) and the present “art” part is when the viewer is also thinking, while experiencing. Not that this thinking necessarily be intellectual, or even rational (on the artist part as well). Emotional, reactive thinking is nonetheless thinking. Experiencing is in essence a conceptual activity. Consciousness is a mental phenomenon. Art is not meant to be liked, it is not meant to be understood either, art is meant to be experienced and that experience is partly visceral and emotional but essentially cerebral. Art makes you think. Even dance, the most Dionysian of the arts implies thinking. The dancer thinks while dancing. Otherwise, there would be no dance. To say “conceptual art” is like saying “wet water”, it is nonsense. Now, water can be cold or hot, it can be boiling or frozen, but it is always wet. Art is always conceptual or it isn't. The work in “Traffic” is not anymore (or any less) conceptual than any other art. The work in “Traffic” may be immaterial and could be categorized as “immaterial art”, or even “idea art” (ideas are very different than concepts). In fact this work is predicated on context, more than anything else: the original context in which it was made or presented, or experienced, the context

of its documentation, and now the institutional context of the VAG (or the context of the lavish catalogue accompanying the event). Without context, it wouldn't even exist at all, in most cases. It would remain meaningless. "Contextual Art" would be the right category. In the present obfuscating "context" in art, I am not holding my breath.

The Ian Wallace show is a bit different. This is art as system, art as a bureaucratic (and narcissistic) activity. Narcissism, always present by necessity in large doses in any artist's work, is the main unifying factor between these two shows. The particular brand of Vancouver narcissism is also at work here. The saving grace for Ian Wallace's work is that it is a clear precursor (never a bad thing in art) for the more recent stylistic formal system of PowerPoint presentations. This is not art at the intersection of painting and photography, since I don't see where the painting can possibly be here, but instead, Art as static PowerPoint. Basically, different iterations of the same PowerPoint still for the last thirty years (and counting). To see my point, you only have to compare the work with that of Mondrian, the artist to whom Wallace is clearly most indebted. In the show, Mondrian makes a literal appearance in three small, flat, squarish images on the wall referencing this extraordinary artists (*is that what makes them "paintings", flat and square and on the wall? Is it enough for something to follow accepted conventions for that something to effectively be that phenomenon?*). Yet, you can look at a Mondrian for hours and never exhaust it. I dare anyone to do the same with a Wallace. This is art as billboard, to be viewed from a moving car, on the freeway.

Am I the only one to think that artists like Ian Wallace, Jeff Wall, Stan Douglas, Rodney Graham and the whole Vancouver Photo-Conceptualist "school" are but the present version of the bourgeois academic "paintings" of the late 19th Century? The same themes: heroic (or anti-heroic) landscapes, portraiture, still-lives, historical records of events (often factice or recreated), etc.; the same grand manner (ostentatious scale), the same commercial and critical success? The difference is that the original 19th Century academic artists had extraordinary skill and technique at their disposal, and in many instances, not an insignificant amount of imagination and talent. All of this sadly lacking in Ian Wallace or in all the "works" on view in Traffic. May I suggest that the collectors, private and public, of such works (remember what happened to academic painting!) who spend huge amounts on such acquisitions would be better to invest their money elsewhere, say real estate? Of course, such collectors probably made their money in real estate to begin with. Now they are spending it lavishly and perhaps foolishly on amassing art whose main purpose it is to create and maintain their social importance and status, which they would not always earn otherwise. In fact, this is probably the only really significant and relevant role contemporary art plays in culture now... Of course, the monetary value of such works will never go down (significantly). The art market and the art system will see to that. Such work will be "hagiographized" and fictionalized in art history and remain inescapable like so much similar, equally conventional, work before. In fact this is why it is all on view at the VAG right now.

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