

From *N. E. Thing Co. to Gold, Silver & Lead*

Iain Baxter, *N.E. Thing Co.*, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto

Jed Lind, *Gold, Silver and Lead*, Toronto Sculpture Garden

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John K. GRANDE

The art world is not immune from criticism, when it comes to artistic practise and the effects art production has on the environment. Sometimes making a statement actually damages the environment. *N.E. Thing Co. Paint into Earth*, SFU, Vancouver, B.C. (1966-68) entailed pouring toxic paints into the earth, an irresponsible yet effective way of communicating an idea. And yet the physics of the world occurs regardless of our ideologies, our ideas, our concepts. And this may be the central failing of conceptual art as a historical phenomenon. Despite all the clever idioms, post-historical quips, the world changes, evolves regardless of all that, and surprisingly fast these days. In 1990, Iain Baxter made *CO2 Landscape—Homage to Chico Mendes* (1990), (Mendes was a Brazilian worker

who fought for the preservation of the rainforest). Here Baxter threw in artificial plants, with a painted backdrop that included fake burning logs and a giant thermometer dead centre.

If art is an idea and you should have fun with it, as conceptual art espoused, then Iain Baxter personifies his era. His first solo show was in Japan and Baxter claims the Seattle painter Morris Graves was an influence (as he was for Emily Carr). After a car accident in Saskatchewan, the ardent ski enthusiast Iain Baxter was transformed by an awareness of the fragility of life. He became an artist and has remained so ever since. Baxter produced any number of documents for the *N. E. Thing Co.* before and since its incorporation in 1969 as a forum that paralleled consumer culture. Along with his then wife Ingrid Baxter, he had a Telex machine and saw language as a tool of play, so much so he added

the ampersand to become Iain Baxter& to his legal name. ... The continuity of this process became an installed pile of colourful ampersands in one *N. E. Thing* show. Out of minimalism, a maximalist is born! All this was in the spirit of General Idea's *FILE* magazine, and bolstered by the presence of *Vanguard* magazine in Canada's west. Baxter, the enigma, was proof positive that the matter follows the mind in art making and vice versa! Iain and Ingrid Baxter's *N. E. Thing Company* made their name in Canada, the United States and further afield.

One of the most amusing of displays at the A.G.O. is the *N.E. Thing Gold Star or Red Star* "judgment" of works by other artists. The artist becomes the judge amid the pantheon he is a part of. Ellsworth Kelly's *Red-White*, an oil on canvas from 1963, is given the boot with a red star while Marcel Duchamp (mentor of the concept and all that Iain Baxter, John Baldessari and Ed

Ruscha and so many other Western artists came to be in the art world) gets both a Gold Star and a Red Star. The implication is that Marcel Duchamp surpassed judgment through sheer intelligence. Duchamp fits all categories for art—good and bad—as the idea surpasses the medium.

Digital Code Landscape (1999-2008) has reclaimed pedestals and television sets of varying sizes and dimensions, with landscapes and painted motifs in acrylic, covering their potentially luminescent surfaces. We feel Marshall McLuhan's influence on Baxter's art here. *One Canada Video* (1992) is an installation that is participatory art cum quasi-functional sculpture. One climbs into an electric car to watch a video on the windscreen window. Mountains, sea and sky and any number of images appear, videography Ingrid and Iain gathered over time. Cathartic and Zen, some of the images are worthy of a Japanese



Iain BAXTER&, *Zero Emissions*, 2008. Taxidermied animals, car exhaust pipes, and painted metal C-clamps. Dimensions variable. Collection of the artist. Photo: Art Gallery of Ontario. ©2012 IAIN BAXTER&.



conceptually rooted decision, but one that related to patterning, construction and illusion.”

The auto-body as assemblage becomes a totemic, potentially ancient or proto-futurist monument. The verticality of the assemblage recalls some ancient standing stone Menhir, but this standing sculpture is not part of a tribal ritual, instead it is made of what from afar looks like a pile of cars, far from the daily highway flow we are so used to. *Gold, Silver and Lead* is alchemical, dream-like, unreal, and at the same time, it could be a comment on car culture, and the obsolete nature of the individual vehicular dream as the design ultimatum for the world's highways, housing and shopping developments. \leftarrow

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Iain BAXTER&, *N.E. Thing Co. Still Life with Winter Vista*, 1996. Cibachrome transparency and light box. 122 x 155 x 20 cm. Collection of the artist. Photo: Art Gallery of Ontario. ©2012 IAIN BAXTER&.

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woodcut... Identifying with place (a very eco-art and up to date way of dealing with the economy in the face of consumer culture and ecology) may be more global, cosmological and universal than moving around the planet, and it's certainly more ecological. There are obvious inconsistencies between an artwork that advocates crossing Canada to "know the country" and *Zero Emissions* (2008) an anti-automobile installation that features a forest of car mufflers and stuffed animals — raccoon, wild turkey, fish, duck to name a few. Each is perched atop a car muffler and each muffler has a painted yellow metal C-clamp that closes off the potential exhaust. Joseph Beuys actually planted trees. He was consistent!

N. E. Thing's playful prerogative takes Dan Flavin's light pieces as the starting point to make *Blown Out Flavin* (1965). Here, black material hangs metaphorically downwards, deflated, a pallid representation of what a fluorescent Flavin-like light fixture can be. Concrete and conceptual art was a new frontier in the 1960s, but the terrain rapidly became heavily trodden and repetitive as literally thousands of artists jumped aboard the idea boat, eventually sinking it.

A video of Iain Baxter's Toronto Eco-Art van initiative is cute, but pollutes while it proselytizes. This is like Methodist conceptual art posing as eco-activism. What did Madonna say? Poppa Don't Preach! The most convincing concept piece is the early initiative *You Are Now in the Middle of a N.E. Thing Co. Landscape!* (1965-1971). This is as pure an N.E. Thing

event/artwork as you can get! We see a sign stating you Are Now in the Middle of an N.E. Thing landscape. The sign is a marker set up in the landscape. And the message is that landscape is as much a concept as anything else.

From exhaust muffler pipes to car bodies, over at the Toronto Sculpture Garden, Jed Lind's *Gold, Silver and Lead* is a vertical totem that, like a modern-day Brancusi *Endless Column*, builds its post-industrial conception upwards in 3-D. Lind is a Canadian sculptor who lives in L.A. He reinvents the personal from the standardized. Functional becomes aesthetic, and all this, in a site that was once a

parking lot—the Toronto Sculpture Garden.

As these piled auto bodies are derived from a 1979 Honda Civic body and are made from 1/4 inch steel, a material Lind says he "treated like paper (...) translating complex curves into hard edges." The totemic ensemble, all painted in a uniform colour, mirror one another as they rise upwards. Used for getting from A to B, the car is now an aesthetic object in a site. As Lind comments, "The choice for the number of cars was to create a strong reference to Brancusi's *Endless Column*, and to give the illusion that work continues above and below the viewer. (...) It was not a



Jed LIND, *Gold, Silver & Lead*, 2011. Dimensions: 757 x 238,7 x 124,4 cm. Toronto Sculpture Garden. Photo: J. LIND.