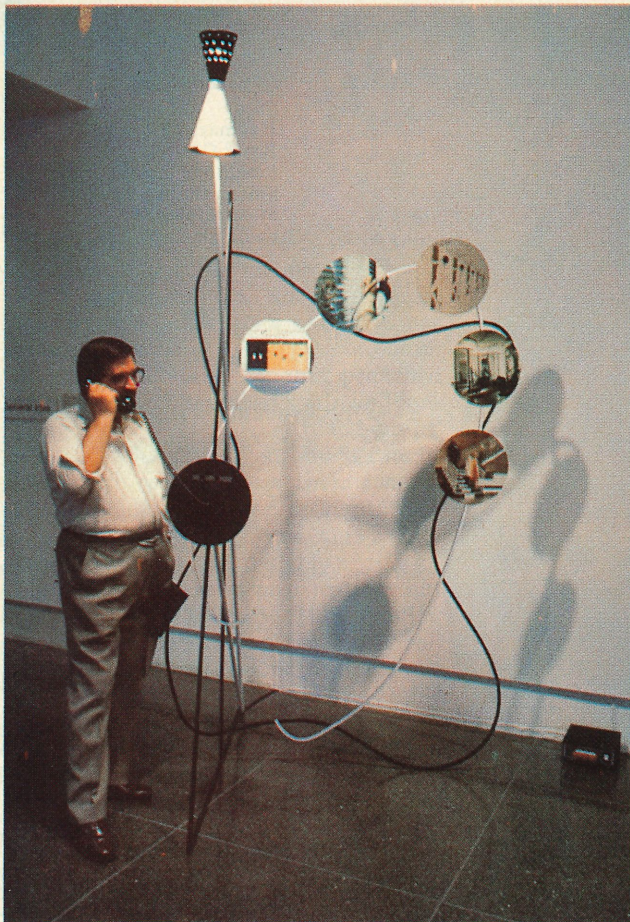
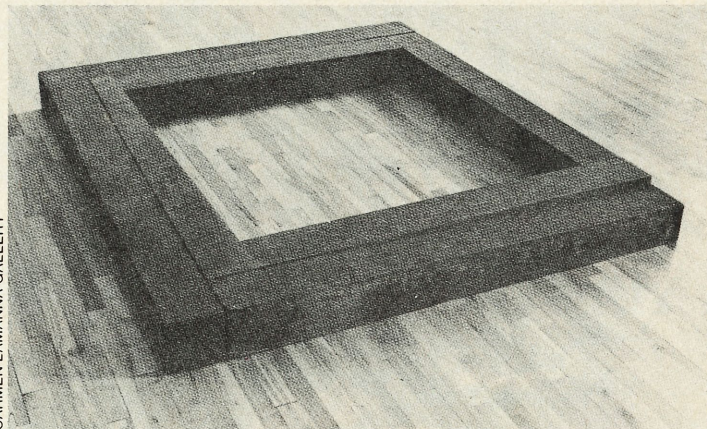
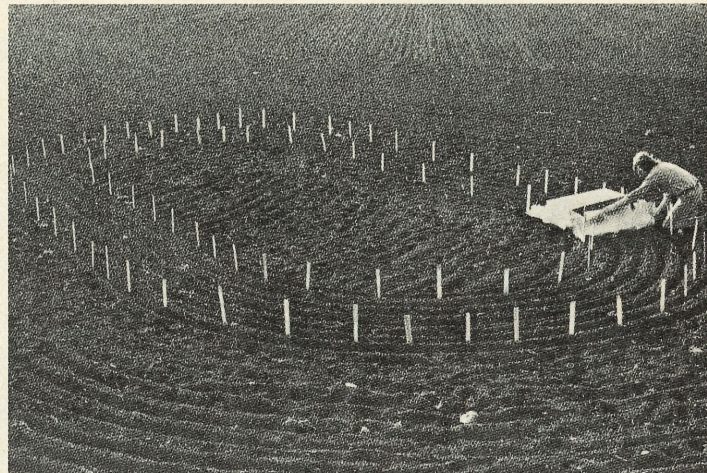


A clearinghouse of trends



CARMEN LAMANNA GALLERY



GABOR SZILASI

By Philip Monk

In Ottawa, it seems that politics invades even the galleries of art. *Pluralities*, the National Gallery's 100th anniversary celebration which opened this month, plays the old political gambit of aiming to please everyone. Bureaucratic policies of pluralism have infiltrated this institution and the result—an exhibition of 62 works by 19 artists from Halifax to Victoria—is a shopping cart of contemporary interests. Behind the fashionable and noncommittal exhibition title lies an uncertain direction for contemporary art at the National Gallery.

Periodically the gallery, as Canada's major art institution, has actually managed to take the pulse of the country through a show like this. But with exhibits few and far between, and the vacant position of a permanent curator of contemporary art, some question whether this show can be considered a reaffirmation of the gallery's commitment to recent Canadian art, especially such an evasive, makeshift replacement

for the critical international exhibition that was cancelled mysteriously in the midst of preparation. With the erosion of support for contemporary art (resulting in curator Pierre Théberge's move to the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts), the gallery abjured responsibility of selection for this show, delegating the chore to four guest curators from across the country. Such covert decentralization—opening the exhibition space to the misplaced polemics of at least two of these guest curators—effectively undermines the National Gallery as a consistent guiding force in Canadian art.

With something for everyone, much of the art is forgettable; the institution is turned into a clearinghouse for artistic trends. The simple concern for an esthetic display of material, uniting the craft of gallery personnel and artists, is what accounts for the initial attractiveness of the show. But while technically proficient, the installations and sculptures are old and tired. Mowry Baden's ramp built into the gallery, on which viewers precariously climb after sign-

One of General Idea's information booths (left); 'Field' by Proch (top); Poulin's 'Quadrature': abdicating as leader in art

ing waivers, and Stephen Cruise's installation of pseudo-dream mysticism, are largely dependent on the sheer theatricality of their presentation. Substance is lacking, and more than half the work could not stand alone. One of the few artists to engage the viewer is Roland Poulin, whose sculpture displays a freshness of vision, his elegant square enclosures of low concrete beams demanding careful attention to the subtle variations within their regular forms. Another Montreal artist, Betty Goodwin, slowly envelops the viewer in her hermetic enclosure. Walking through the dimly lit, tomb-like tunnels and sombrely rich colored spaces of *Passage in a Red Field* is like being trapped inside a painting.

Other artists take their cue from the nature of the gallery itself. General Idea, a group of three Toronto artists, parodies the display of art as a beauty pageant, using the gallery as their

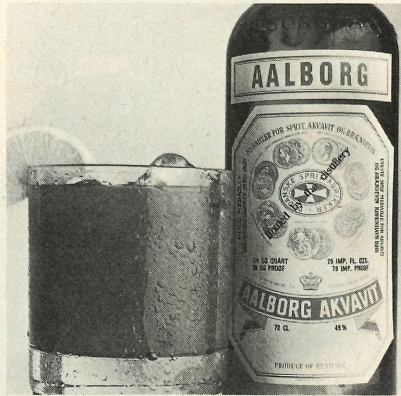
"Miss General Idea Pavilion"—an architectural fantasy gleaned from the myths of mass culture. They have installed three information booths, expropriating, for example, the main staircase as Miss General Idea's "Staircase of Honour" and even encroaching upon other artworks on display. Like art parasites they inhabit any media, cleverly turning the National Gallery into an elaborate and witty art advertisement for themselves.

But the National Gallery itself does not advertise what it intends for contemporary arts. Behind a double screen of pluralism, the exhibition suggests an eclectic acceptance of a wide range of art and the impossible diversity of the country. Most of the art could be made in any art centre in Canada, or elsewhere for that matter. Only Philip Fry's choices express a sense of regionalism: Joe Fafard's ceramic portraits of Indians, David Thauberger's postcard paintings in lurid Hong Kong colors, Alex Wyse's folksy constructions and Don Proch's fields transform the gallery into an oversized fairground souvenir stand. Bordering on kitsch in the context of the National Gallery, they have little to do with contemporary art. Fry's personal polemic, pitting humble regionalism against the gallery's internationalism, is elegantly refuted by Chantal Pontbriand's intelligent selections (Poulin, Goodwin, Pierre Boogaerts, General Idea and Rober Racine.) Or that would be so if the conflict was not lost in the acres of neutral gallery space.

At least Pontbriand, the editor of the contemporary art magazine *Parachute*, captured in her choices some of the vitality of performance art and the use of language and text otherwise avoided (including video) in the exhibition. Racine, working overtime in both performance and textworks, presents *Pluralites'* most excessive contribution: after transcribing by hand all of Flaubert's novels, he laboriously counted the number of words, sentences and paragraphs for each chapter. This text covers the walls of one room. The computations determine the size of a staircase Racine will build, from which he plans to read Flaubert's *Salammbô*, one chapter from each step ascending the staircase.

More performance may have added a necessary edge to the event. But the lack of any critical statement, investigation or explanation in what the show's catalogue assumes to be a period of temporary suspension of rules for art, in the end reveals itself only to be a suspension of critical judgment and a smokescreen for the disarray at the National Gallery. With excuses and a blind eye to conflict, and no future direction indicated, this event is more a wake than a joyful rebirth. ☘

Is there room for another Mary in your life?



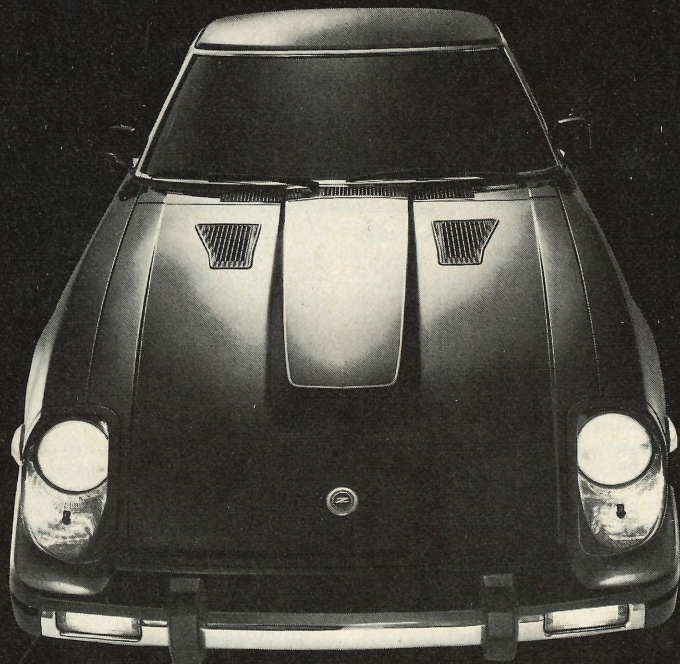
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