



Jeff Wall, *Picture of Women*, 1979, seamed cibachrome transparency and fluorescent light, 149.9 x 200.7 cm

photo: Jeff Wall, courtesy National Gallery of Canada.

General Idea's "Staircase of Honour"; the cafeteria as "Colour Bar Lounge"; and even Claes Oldenburg's *Bedroom Ensemble* as Miss General Idea's private bedroom serve these gestures of "inhabitation". By turning the National Gallery into a beauty pageant, this group has created a clever advertisement for itself. But that gesture of inhabitation is only another recycling of General Idea's latest model, turning fashionable theory into style and content. As in the recent video tape, *Test Tube*, the metadidactic content only explains; the work does not inhabit, nor effect its prescription. Theory functions as a sign, not intensive content.

In another imperialistic gesture, Gary Kennedy proposed to adjust all the landscape paintings in the permanent collection, so that horizon lines matched his eye level. When told that this space was not "allocated" to the exhibition, he requested his piece be all the space in the exhibition not given to other artists. Generous to an insult, the Gallery responded with a whole room. The invisibility of Kennedy's original proposal and the empty and petulant gesture of the result supposedly reveal the invisible (i.e., ideological) determining role of the art gallery and perceptual conventions. Do we acknowledge this once more for what we already know? To linger in that analysis is to fall into another academic formalism — a type of work we recognize as a style: a tired critical "terrorism".

In the space between site-determined installations and free-standing formal sculpture, we can locate a type of installation that arranges objects in space: Stephen Cruise and John McEwen at the National Gallery. McEwen groups iron objects, dependent on placement not site. The origin and orientation of these objects are open, since these concrete images are neither signs nor symbols, and depend largely, and problematically, on the rightness of placement, metaphorical simplicity, and technical reference to recent sculptural solutions. Cruise's pseudo-mystical *One Chance to Lie Between* occupies the non-site of dream space, but its dream logic is not evident. Its "private symbolism" too narrowly ties itself to the artificial context of theatrical lighting (therefore representational) and beauty of material.

The word "passage" in Betty Goodwin's title, *Passage in a Red Field* — suggesting a gesture in a painting, a building tunnel, or a physical motion — condenses potential meanings, just as her installation bridges categories. This walk-in installation, with its narrow and alternately dark and bright tunnels, ambivalently blends sculptural depth with painterly light and colour:

PLURALITIES: EXPERIMENT OR EXCUSE?

Pluralities/1980/Pluralités National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

5 July - 7 September

The National Gallery of Canada, in its roundup of twenty-one contemporary artists from Halifax to Victoria, allows that: "An eclecticism, not only of method and material, but of ideology, characterizes this exhibition. If pluralism has for the present become a sort of vessel for the isms of the past, as well as those to come, it is because the rules for making art have not simply changed, but have perhaps been temporarily suspended."

The National Gallery announced its abdication from responsibility with a disclaimer, linking critical lapse to eclectic and stylish pluralism. We expect more from that at one time leading and respected institution. Any exhibition there is not only a display of contemporary art, but an indication of the Gallery's position and policies. That is, the Gallery connotes the exhibition, in the practical politics of its commitment to contemporary art, not as an ideological agent. And it is not the politics of *who* was or was not included, but *what* was avoided through critical apathy and inhibition.

Despite the eclectic ideologies apparently manifested, at least half of the choices are conventionally post-minimalist. Most of the works are either installations or free-standing sculpture. The installations are site-specific or independent constructions; and the sculptures are mainly isolated artistic phenomena.

Mowry Baden's *Ottawa Room* is determined by its site. His tilted ramp, zig-zagging 3.7 meters high, establishes both a new relation to the two-storey space of the gallery in which it is located, and heightens awareness of the participating spectator's body through the crippling isolation of that body in difficulty and under threat. Yet how far does this art succeed past its own theatricality and phenomenological

"dumbness"? The same applies to Max Dean's "threatening" installation of moving cars, which at least has the redeeming relief of humour and a more complex dialogue between inside and outside the gallery.

Other artists cue their contribution to a metaphorical reading of the context. General Idea, appropriating the whole of the National Gallery as the "Miss General Idea Pavilion", has dispersed three telephone booths — like tape-recorded guided tours — throughout the Gallery. The main staircase as Miss

Robert Racine, *Gustave Flaubert 1880-1980 Salambô*, installation view, graphic linguistic analysis and manuscript

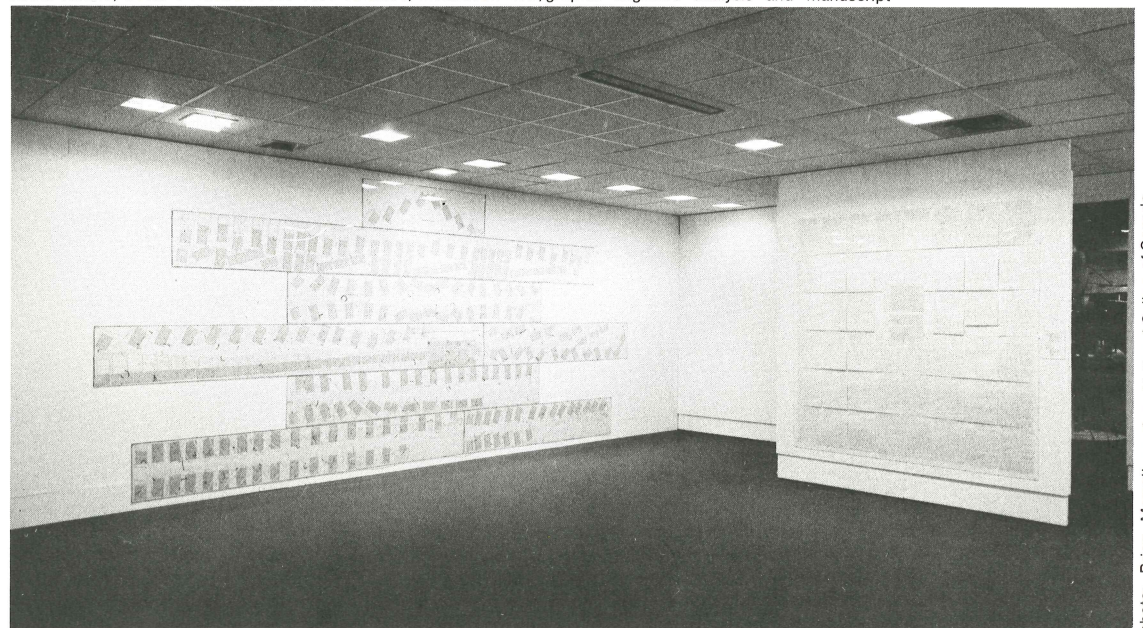
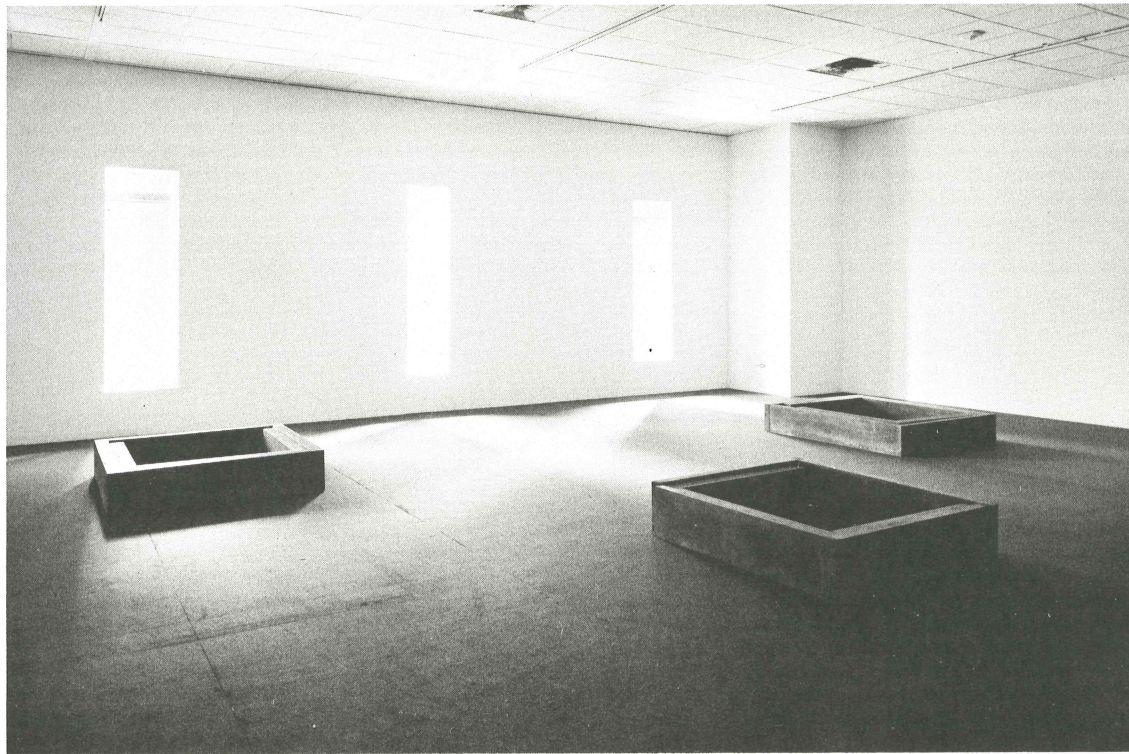


photo: Brian Merrett, courtesy National Gallery of Canada



Roland Poulin, from left to right: *En*, 1979, *Sans*, 1979, *Contenu* 1979- 1980, installation view

photo: Brian Merritt, courtesy: National Gallery of Canada

its three-dimensional suffusion seems closer to rich and sensuous painting than to sculpture. The same inquisitive attentiveness, but now to the nuances of sight in sense and cognition, directs the viewer to the variations in regularity in Roland Poulin's low concrete enclosures.

Generally, the sculptures in the exhibition make so many preliminary demands just to be taken formally, whether they are Claude Mongrain's concrete sculptures of formal oppositions and balanced masses, or Mia Westerlund's sculpture of effects which simply maps drawing onto sculptural form.

Painting is not as absent as we would initially presume. It lingers from Kennedy's original proposal; and is present in Goodwin's installation; it is weakly investigated in Iain Baxter's hand-coloured photograph "paintings"; and performs the representational background for Jeff Wall's photographic focus on the structure of desire in looking at an image. The life-size figures in Wall's Manet-based *Picture for Women* — transparent cibachrome photograph backlit like billboard advertisements — stage a play of glances, and return our gaze and that of the camera, itself recording and captured.

How representative is the exhibition in its actual absences? The National Gallery excused video by sending it to the Venice Biennale; but video is important enough to present to a national audience within Canada. Textworks and performance are combined in one artist alone — Rober Racine — absurdly out of proportion to the reorientation of the artistic field that language and performance have produced. Racine's labourious reworking and overworking of Flaubert's writing serve as a pretext for the construction of a stage: a staircase for the performance of language as a material field. After Racine has reconstructed Flaubert's act of writing as a "value-work", the number of words, sentences, and paragraphs for every chapter from the hand-transcribed novels determine the size of a staircase built for the reading of each novel. With the mutilated and multiplying texts covering the walls of one room, Racine at one point performed Flaubert's *Salambo*, reading one chapter from each step ascending the staircase. But with its sources in the obsessive countings and "writings" of Hanne Darboven (and LeWitt's systemic and irrational

machines); the endurance performances of Beuys and Robert Wilson; the French theory of écriture; and the utterances of Artaud; is this remarkable and fascinating work too neat a theoretical construction for the content it may declaim?

The "temporary suspension" of rules in this exhibition only disguises the suspension of critical judgement at the National Gallery. By delegating responsibility to four guest curators, the Gallery declined consistent investigation and statement. Assembling the exhibition as an old-style biennale of nineteen one-man shows could not but lead to eclecticism. The gallery further enforced this eclecticism in the catalogue, alphabetically ordering the entries on artists and refusing either the grouping of the curators' choices or introductory critical statements. The tactic to circumvent loss of their curators covertly realizes the National Museums' policy of decentralization, and effectively undermines the Gallery as a singular force in Canadian art (if we recognize that need, or want it). The National Gallery's "experiment" with guest curators was not successful, as it led to the conventional choices of Willard Holmes and Allan MacKay, and the misplaced regional hobbyhorse of Philip Fry. Still without a permanent curator of contemporary art, the National Gallery's commitment to contemporary art may not have been temporarily suspended as much as irrevocably damaged.

PHILIP MONK

MURRAY MACDONALD

Installation

Optica,

May 30 - June 21 1980

In a text printed on the wall near the entrance, Murray MacDonald gives some clues about the prototype of his installation which took place last June at Optica. Reading it, we realize that he isn't talking so much about a visual model — the specific look of the Mosque at Cordoba — but of his physical experience within a certain kind of space. He says that he wanted "to maintain that 'forest of pillars' sensation (on a modest scale) which would act as a transitional device between the whole space of the room and the actual space of the individual." So while there is no real visual resemblance to Cordoba (where the columns support a complex system of tiered arches), there are kinaesthetic references.

This particular sculptural/architectural cross-reference is effective because of the sculptural nature of the spatial conception at Cordoba (which it shares to some extent with the temples of Egypt and Greece). In the book *Architecture and the Phenomenon of Transition*, Siegfried Giedion describes this conception as being "concerned with space-radiating forces of volumes, and the tension of their interrelation with one another." Such a feeling for space results in the architecture of the hypostyle hall which is fluid, open, and essentially additive, requiring active penetration to be known, rather than being capable of being seized imagistically, as is the volume-enclosing architecture we are most familiar with now. The nature of the differences becomes quite specific if we make an analogy between these attitudes to space and the antithetical experiences of space available in an auditorium and in a basement parking garage.

Of course, MacDonald's installation is not an independent structure, but rather an articulation of an existing gallery space which had to accommodate the location of supporting members and structural features like windows, entrances and jags in the walls. The means are simple. The piece consists of rows of cement-covered columns which are lower and more densely grouped at the far wall opposite the entrance. These are joined at the top by a lattice of wooden beams so that a rectangular grid is suspended over our heads. Down the centre of this forest of columns runs a low wooden ramp whose gentle slope towards the end of the room is roughly but not quite parallel with the descending height of the columns. Light is minimal. The windows have been covered up and the piece is lit by only three low-hanging spots, two near the entrance wall which cast low, raking shadows across the columns, and one at the end which brightly illuminates the far wall.

Entering the gallery, it is perhaps this shadowy ambience which first seizes the imagination. It sculpturally defines the columns, emphasizing their physical presence, and the brightness at the end of the room lures us, moth-like, towards it. As we move between the columns, the quality of light changes subtly, and the character of the space is altered depending on where we are. The direction of the light follows that of the ramp, and so echoes the progress we are expected to make through the work.

The ramp which invites us into the space becomes both the visual and physical axis of the room. In climbing its steps we have to focus upon the normally unnoticed experience of entering, whereby we are separated from the mundane space outside. And the action of rising and then slowly descending helps to emphasize our active penetration of the space. As it brings us to the far end of the room the ramp narrows slightly: the scale of everything has gradually changed, the columns are shorter, about our size, and closer together, and the light also is brighter. We feel a gathering of energies, an increased tension at this end.