

The East — Environment of Cultural Vacuity

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Au delà de la sculpture

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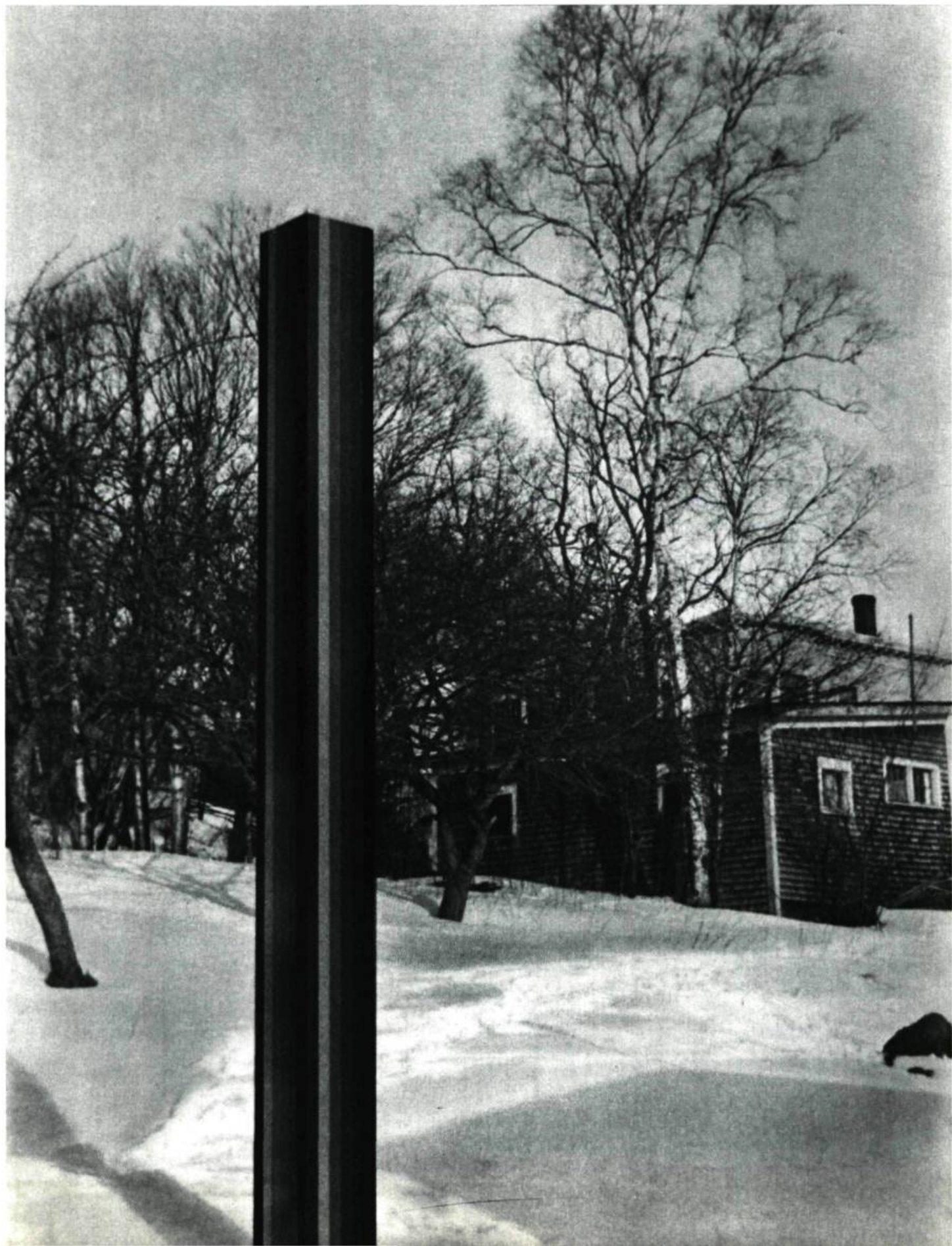
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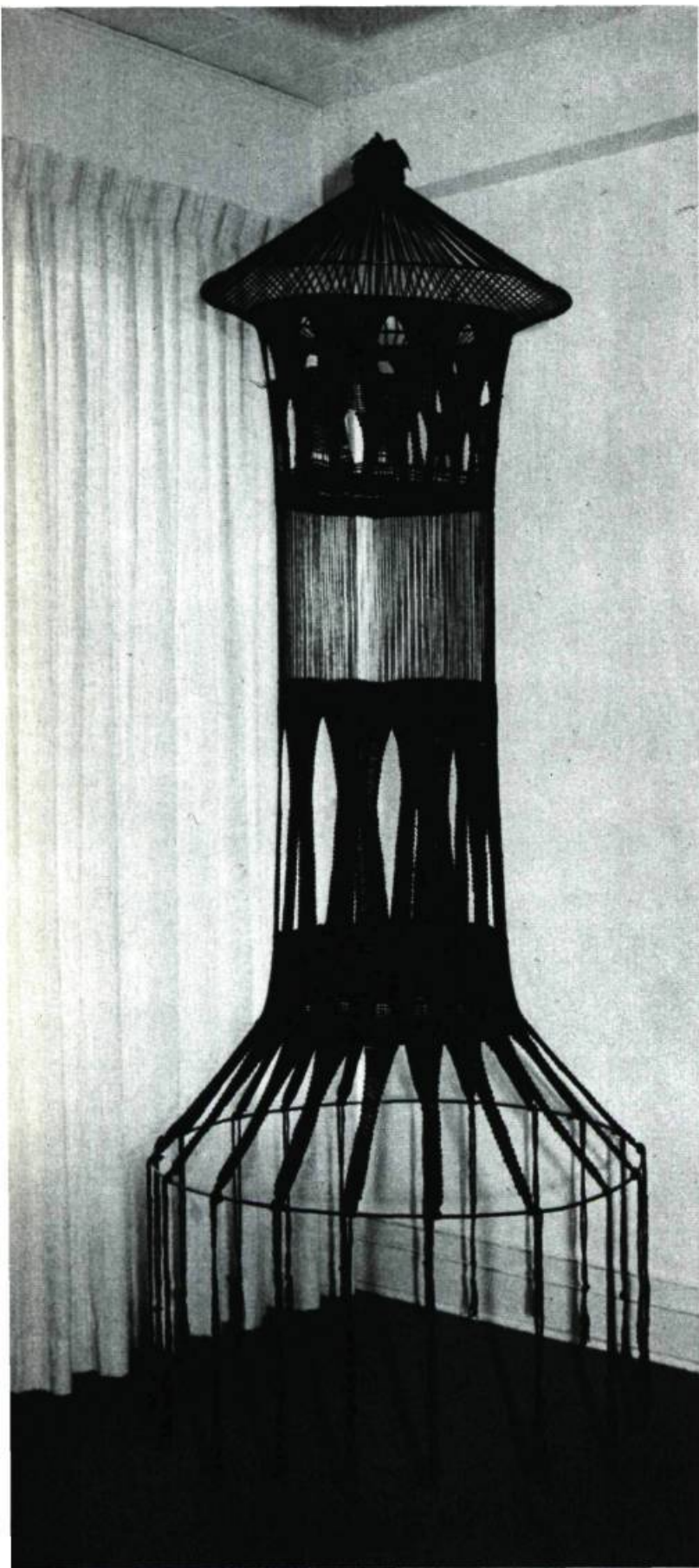
John COOPER. People, 1967.
Bois polychrome.
H.: 74" (188 cm).

the east — environment of cultural vacuity

BY LUKE ROMBOUT



Fred WILLAR. Sundogs. Masonite émaillé, 144" x 11" x 11" (365,8 x 28 x 28 cm). Collection Conseil des Arts du Canada.



At a recent arts conference in Calgary, frequent references were made to 'the East'. What was meant there, it turned out, was that Montreal, Toronto, and Ottawa were considered to be 'the East'. From my point of view, these cities would be considered the Middle-East — the Maritimes being something else again. These references also indicated, and rightly so, that little is happening in the Atlantic provinces which would attract national attention, that is, in the field of the creative arts.

The lack of a potent creative force in this region, past or present, has caused an hiatus of vision, understanding, and response to the arts. One can point to a number of examples to illustrate this statement: Halifax and Saint John, N.B., the two largest cities in the Maritimes, have yet to build an art gallery; the New Brunswick Orchestra was forced to halt its operation this year for lack of support, financial and otherwise. The Beaverbrook Art Gallery in Fredericton and the Confederation Art Gallery in Charlottetown, two galleries most qualified architecturally at least to consider them galleries, are virtually deserted mausoleums once the tourist season is over. Local interest in the arts everywhere in eastern Canada is minimal, except, of course, in amateur art. The Maritime Art Association claims to have 3000 members. Donald Andrus, capable Curator of the Beaverbrook Art Gallery, was fired for having written a scathing critique on one of the amateur exhibitions in his gallery; illustrating that the amateur painters, like the I.O.D.E., are behind the scenes forces to be reckoned with . . .

The lack of any exciting contemporary visual expressions in public places in the Maritimes includes, of course, the subject of sculpture. It is perhaps significant, that in an over-ambitious volume entitled the *Arts in New Brunswick*¹ (past and present), the subject of sculpture was eliminated altogether. There may be seen, scattered through these provinces, the odd contemporary, what I would consider to be *attempts* at sculpture. All of these have been produced locally, that is to say, in this region. The works I have seen so lack in strength, vision, independent expression, and in some cases even understanding of the medium, that one could hardly consider these works sculpture — in the sense, I am sure, that sculpture will be considered and discussed in other articles in this issue.

Only a few artists in the Maritimes are engaged in three-dimensional objects: Fred Willar in Saint John, John Hooper in Hampton, N.B., Claude Roussel in Moncton, Charlott Lindgren and Sarah Jackson in Halifax, Hans Melis in Newfoundland. A few painters have dabbled in sculpture. Tom Forrestall in Fredericton and Paul Tisson in the same city. Examples of work by the latter two artists may have been seen at the Atlantic Pavilion at EXPO 67, where each had been commissioned a large sculpture. Neither were equipped artistically and technically, to cope with such a project and the resultant works were amateurish and banal.

Hooper and Roussel, among others, received in 1966 commissions for murals to be installed in the New Brunswick Government's Centennial Building — a large building for the provincial government — in Fredericton. Roussel's mural (theme: paper and pulp industry) fails to rise above the level of "Beaux-Arts Figurococo". He has been a consistent uneven sculptor; most of his works are deprived intellectually and even when executed in large dimensions, his sculptures seldom if ever suggest monumentality or presence in space. His works often seem a compromise to satisfy the clergy (he has executed a number of major church commissions) or the architects, or both, or he simply has not determined yet

Arts in New Brunswick edited by Tweedie, Cogswell & MacNutt; Brunswick Press, 1967

whether to break away from the traditions of an academic fine arts background.

John Hooper's mural *The People of New Brunswick*, 48' x 6' high, in the same aforementioned building, does, unfortunately, fare not much better than Roussel's. His work too suffers from an apparent compromise to accommodate the provincial authorities or popular taste. Although a recent work, it has already a dated look. Technically competent, the mural was envisioned with ambition and scope but in final analysis, i.e. the completed project, it no longer suggests much of Hooper's vision, which is lively and direct. His wood sculptures (which, in view of the foregoing one would be tempted to call 'his own') express a kind of inventive social realism leaning towards the Pop images.

The bright lights on the scene, such as it is, are Charlotte Lindgren and Fred Willar. Lindgren is an extremely accomplished and inventive weaver, working almost exclusively in three dimensions. Characteristically, her work cannot be seen in public place in the Maritimes — she has yet to sell a major work in Halifax, although her weavings have received international critical acclaim, and she is now represented in important collections. She is clearly a special talent who produces beautiful and exciting visual images. Incidentally, while we are in Halifax, the award for the Worst Canadian Sculpture should positively be handed to Reg. Dockrill for his *20th Century Student* which may be seen outside the new Student Union Building at Dalhousie University. Nearly 10' high, it is a monument to sculptural absurdity, a colossus to bad taste, a memorial to intellectual deprivation. The only thing which one can say in defense of this work, is that it must be seen to be believed. The interior of the student building houses a number of sculptures by Sarah Jackson, whose ideas derive from more sources than there is space here to discuss.

Young Saint John artist Fred Willar holds the promise of a first rate sculptor. His work has not been seen much (Dorothy Cameron selected one of his sculptures for the *Sculpture 67* show in Toronto) and his large *Completed Rainbow* was included in the *Perspective 68* exhibition. Recently he has had a one-man show at the Owens Art Gallery, while he has also exhibitions scheduled at the Confederation Art Gallery and at the Creative Art Centre at the University of New Brunswick. His sculptures are for the most part bold cubic forms, measuring eight feet and up, constructed from polyester and other synthetic materials. His 'diminishing' boxes, one placed on top of the other, suggest a ziggurat-like solidness, convincingly projecting a state of existence. He is working towards the minimal directions, indicating that he attempts to project ideas which are fresh, and which belong to today. Although a few of his sculptures are perhaps too reminiscent of some of the big names, he nevertheless gives every reason to believe that he will soon be his own man.

This random sampling of artists does not hold out much hope for a strong development of sculpture in the Maritimes within the near future. The artists are not here, nor, I suspect, would there be a strong response to their work if it were readily available. There exists a cultural crisis here, which is recognized by few and thus ignored by most. Economic conditions are such, that efforts on all levels of government in all eastern provinces are concentrated towards attracting industries. This is a reasonable and necessary pursuit. What is not recognized, unfortunately, is that economic progress by itself will not develop a healthy or satisfied society, or a visually exciting environment. Until such time as it is understood that the *creative arts must develop with equal progression* to that of industry, the Maritimes will remain isolated culturally and remain an underprivileged area in more ways than one.

Page ci-contre : Charlotte LINDGREN. Laine et acier. Collection Conseil des Arts du Canada.

Ci-dessous : Tom FORRESTALL. Agriculture.

Claude ROUSSEL. L'industrie de la pâte à papier.

