

ETC



## Art and Power

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[See table of contents](#)

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Pierre Auguste Renoir, *Portrait of Mademoiselle Irène Cahen d'Anvers*, 1880, oil on canvas; 65 x 54 cm

**A**s a political artist I often question the relevance of art in the course of history and ultimately take as my proof of the power of art society's repeated efforts to repress its artists. Although we think of repression of the arts as being controlled by evil governments who silence art, the greatest control of art is in the hands of those who support the artist. Through government funding systems; through corporations' selective buying and support for large packaged exhibitions; and through the mainstream gallery systems and limited access to art publications.

We have long looked to the Canada Council not only as a major funder of the arts, but also as an example of political commitment to art in Canada. In truth, the funding coming to artists through the arm's length "jury of our peers" section of the Canada Council is only 15 percent of the monies given to arts organizations. The rest is given through discretionary mechanisms.<sup>1</sup> As for Canada's commitment to the arts, of eight countries studied by David Cwi for the Cultural Policy Institute in Baltimore (Canada, West Germany, the Netherlands, France, Sweden, Italy, Great Britain and the USA), Canada ranks second last when it comes to government support.

At one time our cultural agencies were interested in aiding artists, but since Mulroney's Conservatives have come to power there have been even more

cuts to public funding of the arts as part of a conservative agenda. They believe that government-supported art should reflect conservative values and that the arts must compete in a free market system. In the most recent budget the government has cut funding to various cultural arms. They have cancelled all funding to three Canadian Women's magazines, cancelled postal subsidies to Canadian publications and cut the entire Native people's media budget. Funding to the parallel galleries has changed such that galleries must present a three-year program, leaving them unable to encourage experimental work or work by emerging artists.

This conservative shift has forced the art industries to look to the private sector for funding. Yet only the most conventional art, never individual artists, receive private monies. Eight percent of Canadian corporations used a 20 percent tax deduction to registered Canadian charities, but only one fortieth of one percent of their donations to the arts.<sup>2</sup>

Corporations are very concerned with image and are cautious about funding the avant-garde, (not to mention art that deals with social issues). Most of their contributions to the arts have been in the packaging of large historic traveling exhibitions. Some of the most exploitive corporations in the world "launder" their image by sponsoring such exhibitions.

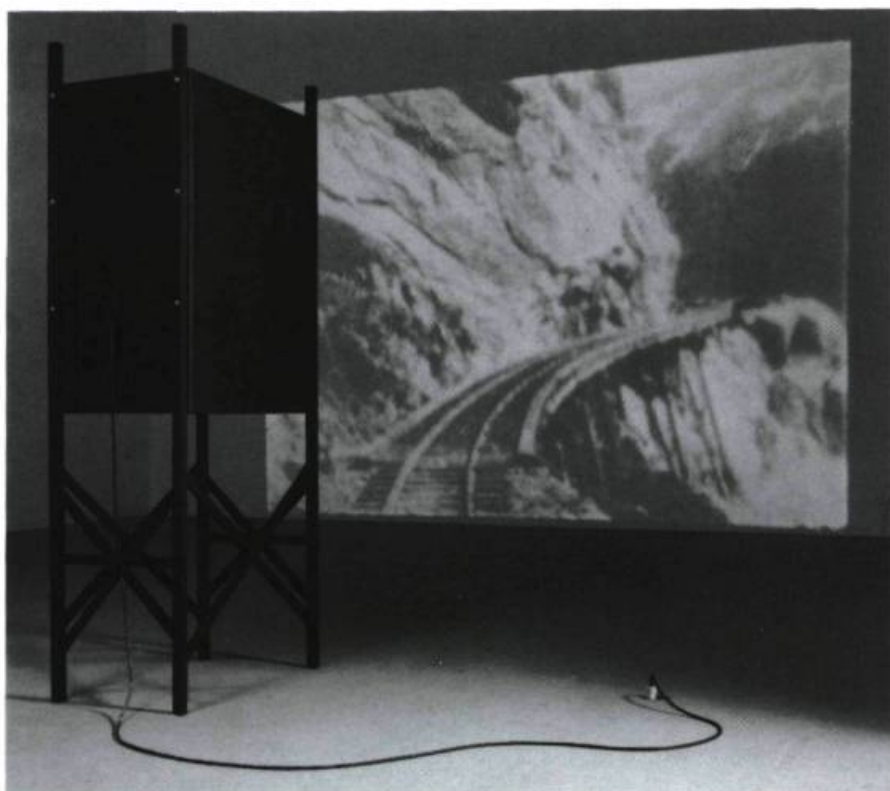
*The Passionate Eye: Impressionist and Other Master Paintings From the E.G. Bührle Collection*, which opened in Montreal last August attests to this. Nowhere is it mentioned that Bührle-made arms were distributed to the Nazis as well as to the Allies, or that the collector's son, who owns many of the works, was convicted of illegal arms sales. And only by reading the provenances at the back of the catalogue will you discover that Renoir's *Portrait of Mademoiselle Irène Cahen d'Anvers* comes from the collection of Hermann Göring.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps it doesn't matter who is controlling the "consciousness industries". Certainly these works should be seen. But museums must not become public relations agencies for the corporate sector. And support for the arts is a cheap form of advertisement. For example, sponsorship of one performance of a major theatre company runs about \$3,000. Thirty seconds of TV time costs between \$80,000 and \$250,000.<sup>4</sup>

Because schools, galleries and media are mainly controlled by white men, their perspective becomes the only recognized form of art expression. Although they make up the majority, those who work outside the mainstream - those with an ethnic or "female" perspective - are not included in the modern art dialogue. For example, 75 percent of art students are women, yet only 15 percent are represented in galleries. Native peoples and persons of colour have an even poorer representation.<sup>5</sup>

In Canada there is a concerted effort on the part of art schools to hire women, yet women still hold very





Stan Douglas, *Overture*, 1986, 16 mm blanc and white film, loop sound and projection box

few of the tenured positions. A count of the reviews in Canadian Art over the past several issues still shows men receiving twice the number of reviews that women receive. Although a few artists were mentioned in group exhibitions, there seem to be no artists of colour in Canada, with the exception of Stan Douglas.

The uniformity of art expression within the art magazines, schools and galleries is brought about by their interdependency. Magazines review the art that is in the contemporary galleries. The galleries exhibit the works of people who either teach in or have graduated from the art schools. The critics and the gallery personnel have attended these same schools. And, to be hired at art schools nowadays, one must have an MFA. This means that art is not taught by artists but by academics. Students are not taught craft but style. And critics admire art only when their input is integral to the piece.

Yet beyond sex or race, all artists are marginalized by their income. The average visual artist's income is still between \$4,000 and \$5,000 a year. Because of their constant state of poverty, artists have very little political clout.

The largest (and most destructive) influence on Canadian culture, however, is the influx of media from the USA. The average Canadian child watches 725 hours of American TV a year.<sup>6</sup> The CRTC's attempts to foster Canadian content on radio and TV with rulings that force stations to include "a certain percentage of material be by Canadians" are significantly phrased backwards: they should read that only a certain percentage of any program may be by foreign artists.

The purchase of Barnett Newman's work *Voice of Fire* can be defended within an art-historical or curatorial context, but in what direction is our National Arts organization going when it prefers to buy works by famous foreigners rather than contribute to the fame and promotion of Canadian artists. Ydessa Hendeles

argues that with an esteemed international collection the art of Canadians gains credibility because of the context.<sup>7</sup> Canadian artists have known for a long time that to gain this credibility they must first exhibit and receive credibility outside Canada.

Art may have the power to change the thinking of societies, but those who control the artist control this power. Through limited access to the granting, educational and gallery systems, and, through the cutbacks of support for individual artists, this power is now in the hands of an elite few. The Conservative government with its conservative agenda to place art in the free market economy means that access to survival funding is constantly diminishing. The buying of foreign art and the presentation of American TV and radio programming, the cuts in postal subsidies for Canadian publications all lead to a breakdown of our Canadian identity and to a transfer of power from the artist to the multinational corporations. Only through the consciousness of the artist and committed lobbying by the industry can we regain this power. If we want our art to represent our culture and our culture to represent the multi-dimensionality of our people, this is our only recourse.

**Jeannie Kamins**

#### NOTES

1. Presentation given to Strategies for Survival Conference by Clive Robinson, Vancouver 1986
2. Ibid
3. *International Herald Tribune*, may 26-27, 1990 - New York Times Service
4. *Fuse*, Summer 1986, The Social and Economic Status of the Artist in English Canada
5. Ibid
6. *Friends of Canadian Broadcasting Publication*, Summer 90
7. *Canadian Art*, summer 90