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Ord, Douglas. *The National Gallery of Canada: Ideas, Art, Architecture*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003. Pp. xii, 496. Illustrations. $49.95 (hardcover)

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Ord, Douglas. *The National Gallery of Canada: Ideas, Art, Architecture*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003. Pp. xii, 496. Illustrations. $49.95 (hardcover).

In a recent edition of her 1961 urban planning critique, Jane Jacobs wrote,

> A city ecosystem is composed of physical-economic-ethical processes active at a given time within a city and its close dependencies . . . [To investigate] city ecosystems demands [that we] focus [not] on "things" and expect them to explain much in themselves. Processes are always of the essence; things have significances [only] as participants in processes.
>
> —"Introduction," *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (rev. 1993)

Douglas Ord's 500-page history of the National Gallery of Canada, more than anything else, is an exposition of process. His provocative juxtapositions reveal rather than describe the multiplicity of issues enfolded within the seeming literalness of built form. Without Ord's ironic bricolage of subtexts, one could scarcely appreciate how the confrontation between then Prime Minister Jean Chretien and protester Bill Clennett, on Flag Day 1996, might form a significant prelude to the prime minister's arrival at the National Gallery of Canada to witness a session of citizenship court, orchestrated for the occasion on the grandiose stage provided by the gallery's Great Hall.

Such anecdotes underline Ord's fascination with the colourability of public space and the vagaries of institutional bureaucracy. He returns again and again to Moshe Safdie's resplendent ramp and Great Hall in the gallery, conceived, it seems, as a sacral prelude to the auratic contemplation of the art collections concealed within.[1] But the site is all too easily subverted for more worldly events, such as court sessions, state dinners, and most recently Hyundai commercials.[2] The narrative is as complex as a Gordian knot, demonstrating by its very character how human rituals, urban fabrics, and larger political landscapes enmesh. It makes for riveting reading.

In his preface Ord describes Moshe Safdie's building as a "physical crucible for ongoing exploration of the relationship between art and the project of the Canadian nation-state, as this has been, is, and will be filtered through the crucial symbolic hinge of a National Gallery" (ix).[3] Collection, institution, structure, and site are bound together as a representation of national cultural heritage. National galleries also partake of a larger agenda by which people are led to "imagine community," as Benedict Anderson would have it. Mandates and meanings, personal visions and political alliances, all contribute to the singular goal that sets national institutions apart from all others.

Ord's analysis is structured in three sections: an introduction to the Moshe Safdie building of 1988, entitled "Magnetic Space"; a discussion of the "Field Before" in the years from 1910 to 1965; and the "Evolution of a Style" detailing the achievements of Jean Sutherland Boggs, from 1966 on, culminating in her work to bring both Safdie's National Gallery and Douglas Cardinal's Museum of Civilization to completion. Ord's emphasis upon built form, particularly upon the Safdie building, departs from the focus of most earlier publications on the gallery and its development.

F. Maud Brown's *Breaking Barriers: Eric Brown and the National Gallery*, of 1964, for example, offered a biographical narrative of her husband's service, from 1910 to 1939, as the gallery's first director, an indication, perhaps, of how singular personalities shaped policy in the early years. Six years later Jean Sutherland Boggs wrote about how the collections were built, under the title *The National Gallery of Canada*. Such a title implicitly identified the institution with its collection, not with location, because purpose-built accommodation had yet to be achieved. The importance of this final step underlines the magnitude of the decisions that were soon to be made about location, design strategy, and most importantly symbolism of the new building.

Even as the planning began, a significant anniversary conspired to underline the past rather than the future. In 1980 the Royal Canadian Academy celebrated its centennial, and Charles Hill, curator of post-Confederation Canadian art, honoured this event with an exhibition centred upon the European academic influence that had guided the academy through the years when diploma pictures laid the foundation for the National Gallery's collection.[4] The same year academician Rebecca Sisler prepared a history of the same organization that highlighted artist members, their diploma pictures, and terms of membership that proclaimed women "eligible," but not "required" to attend business meetings or serve on Council.[5] Only after the completion of Safdie's building was a major architectural study prepared by Withold Rybczynski, whose 1993 *A Place for Art: The Architecture of the National Gallery of Canada* analyzed the historical precedents. Dominated by traditional architectural history, its focus was upon built form, rather than the heady stew of politics, bureaucracy, and personalities that Ord serves up.

Ord's book considers both the lineage of buildings and the locations the gallery occupied in the urban fabric, as well as the way the collections, design, and use of these public sites were enfolded within the debates among directors, curators, politicians, and architects, not to say the larger personalities and events of the day. As the realization of "proper housing" was awaited, the collections grew in a manner that was thoroughly idiosyncratic. Eric Brown declared his distaste for futurism and described Picasso as a painter of "peanut heads." Instead he supported the Group of Seven, whose quest for a national school coincided with the gallery's stated goals. Brown, a Christian Scientist, invested this commitment to nationalism with a high spirituality, shared not only by Lawren S. Harris, but by Brown's successor, Harry McCurry. Ord sees the same kind of metaphysical nationalism in the purchase of Canadian abstract art by Alan Jarvis, while at the same time rejecting American abstract expressionism. For her part, Jean Boggs sought

"museum aura," as if to counter the installation N. E. Thing Co. had placed in the ground floor of the gallery's Lorne building, to transform the space back into an office building, precisely what the site was before the gallery came to occupy it.

Through this preamble we are made to understand that there is a dialogue between building and collection, between collection and director, between director and policy maker, and so on. The gallery's campaign for "proper housing," which began with Eric Brown and wended its way through three buildings and many subsequent administrators, has been realized in the current structure. The entrance ramp and Great Hall, with its sacral references and liminal transition, impart an air of solemnity that prepares the visitor for insular communion within the precinct of the temple. By contrast, Douglas Cardinal's Museum of Civilization, across the river in Hull, bonds with the natural topography and expresses a tradition that finds sanctity in the land, not in standing apart from it.

This is a provocative book that does not reason in straight lines. Ord's complex thinking is also demonstrated by the intricacies of his personal website, which not only promotes his publications and muses about his critics, but comments on news events such as the massacre at Columbine High School.[6] This Toronto-based author and critic has brought the same intellectual pixilation to bear upon his account of the National Gallery. Robert Fulford has described the result as "a book that's opinionated, pretentious, richly informative and highly readable [from an] industrious, thoughtful [historian who is] just crazy enough to be interesting."[7]

To his credit Ord also has a book of essays on contemporary art and art museums, entitled *Navigating without a Compass*, published in 2000, and has edited a war diary with Les Chater entitled *Behind the Fence: Life as a POW in Japan, 1942–45: The Diaries of Les Chater*. Ord also joins Susan Feathers and Carol Sherman for *Yoga in a Muskoka Chair: A Guide for Everyone*, and has two novels on his own account, *Tommy's Farm* (1998) and *Oscar and Jeannie* (2002). This ability to rove easily from one frame of reference to another is the loom upon which the account of the National Gallery is woven.[8] It is rare to find a writer so entirely at home in such a diverse collection of genres.

Ord's pièce de résistance in the matter of the National Gallery goes beyond the book, however. Having spent September 1996 to May 1998 ensconced as a National Gallery fellow, and a total of eight years bringing this book to completion, it is not surprising that he takes a proprietary interest in the welfare of his foster offspring. His horror at the use of the sacred precinct as a backdrop in an automobile commercial is palpable. As he observes with fastidious exactitude, this offensive event aired first on CBC *Newsworld*, on 16 October 2003. Ord recalls that the only car in the gallery during his tenure was John Scott's *Apocalyse #2*, engraved with the entire text of the Book of Revelation.[9] It occupied the rotunda at the rear, near the gallery library, because the Great Hall had to be available to rent for charity functions, parties, and affairs of state, at $5000 a day. But commodification had reached its apogee. For Ord the ultimate admission of shame lay in the fact that such a patently recognizable venue was not even identified.

In 1982 the Federal Cultural Policy Review Committee, under Louis Applebaum and Jacques Hebert, had declared "the cultural sphere, embracing as it does artistic and intellectual activity, has as one of its central functions the critical scrutiny of all other spheres including the political." Ord's objection is that this critical scrutiny has been co-opted.

Notes

1. Douglas Ord, *The National Gallery of Canada: Ideas, Art, Architecture* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003), repeatedly draws upon the ideas of Walter Benjamin. See pp. 202, 203, 332, 346, 364, and 378; and Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York, 1968); Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (New York, 1995); and Mircea Eliade, *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism* (London, 1961).
2. Douglas Ord, "The National Gallery as Automotive Showroom," *flick* 29 (Oct. 2003).
3. Ord, *National Gallery*, ix.
4. Briefly published as Charles Hill, "To Found a National Gallery: The Royal Canadian Academy of Arts 1880–1913," *National Gallery of Canada Journal* 36 (6 Mar. 1980): 2–8.
5. Rebecca Sisler, *Passionate Spirits: A History of the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts, 1880–1980* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1980).
6. "Lear's Shadow," http://home.eol.ca/~dord/#Columbine.
7. Robert Fulford, "Turning the Absurd into an Art Form: Canada's National Gallery Has a History Filled with Bizarre Decisions," *National Post*, 9 Sept. 2003, reproduced on Ord's website.
8. Douglas Ord, "Kawamata's Sheds," *Parachute* 65 (Jan.–Mar. 1992); "The Coyote and the Beer Can (Is There Any Hope for Wildlife Art?)," *C magazine* 35 (Fall 1992): 29–35; "Which John? Visions of the Apocalypse at the National Gallery," *C magazine* 48 (Jan.–Mar. 1996): 18–24; "Circle of History," *Canadian Art* 14 (Fall 1997): 38–40; "The Best Looking Man," *Canadian Art* 15 (Spring 1998): 64–70.
9. Ord, "Which John?"

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Young, Brian. *Respectable Burial: Montreal's Mount Royal Cemetery*. Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003. Pp. lvi, 230. Colour photographs by Geoffrey James. Illustrations, maps. $49.95 (hardcover).

Though dubbed "rural cemeteries" both for their original siting beyond city limits and for their massaged landscapes in the English romantic tradition, cemeteries such as Montreal's Mount Royal, opened in 1852, were, as Brian Young notes, very much "a product of urban society." This handsome commissioned history reveals how the evolving social tensions of a growing metropolis have been reflected in its residents' engagement with death and commemoration.