Vie des arts

A Glance at Art in Toronto

Roald Nasgaard

Volume 21, Number 86, Spring 1977

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/54923ac

Cite this article

A GLANCE AT ART IN TORONTO

By Roald NASGAARD

In six short articles discussing, at most, some twenty artists, this issue of Vie des Arts can hardly claim to give comprehensive coverage to art in Toronto. That would be too formidable a task. Even where individual writers have attempted to range relatively widely across their respective subjects, they have found it more advisable to select according to some preconceived theme rather than risk the danger of merely making inventories. There will consequently be artists and areas of work, not discussed within the following pages, whose contribution to Toronto's artistic life is at least as important, if not more important than many others who are. I think it more useful, therefore, to read the present issue, not so much for who is in and for who is left out, but as a series of reports on current artistic activity in Toronto which attempt to convey something of the city's variety and its vitality.

The apparent need to introduce the issue with a disclaimer points to the difficulty of coming to terms with just what is the art of the city which believe itself, and no doubt is, the most important artistic centre in Canada. From Ontario's contribution to Mosaicart during the Olympics, one might suppose art in Toronto to be essentially abstract, as well as lyrical expressionist in accordance with Barrie Hale's definition of the "Toronto look" of the 1960s. Forum 76, at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, shortly later, however, presented a much more complex picture. Though repeating a number of artists from Mosaicart, Forum 76 also added work not only by as diverse Torontonians as Michaela Berman, Ian Carr-Harris, Louis de Niverville, General Idea, Michael Snow, and Colette Whitten; but also by such dissimilar non-resident artists as Peterson Ewen, Murray Favro, John Boyle and Greg Curnoe who are equally identified with Toronto insofar as they primarily exhibit there.

What it adds up to is a mixed bag indeed, the heterogenous aesthetic content of which is only further complicated by a gamut of other divergent influences which have and do continue to arrive from extreme regionalist and nationalist isolationism to a yearning for international dialogue and recognition, sought by keeping second class status, explored by artists in Toronto, even in those painters who can be seen as perpetuating the lyrical expressionism "Toronto look", any particular sense either of debt to, or rebellion against their immediate teachers in the older generation. Toronto artists have taught them how to behave like artists, but to their credit have learned elsewhere, across the spectrum of current international art, or from the longer twentieth century tradition.

In the long run, a greater sense of historical coherence with Toronto art may well be discernible. But it could never attain the clarity that it does in Montreal where, without oversimplification, it is possible to trace out an internal organic development over the last three decades against which more recent activity can be measured. In Toronto, on the contrary, if a local movement has established itself with some strengths and weaknesses of its own, there is no immediate coherence with Toronto art may well be discernible. But it could never attain the clarity that it does in Montreal where, without oversimplification, it is possible to trace out an internal organic development over the last three decades against which more recent activity can be measured. In Toronto, on the contrary, if a local movement has established itself with some strengths and weaknesses of its own, there is no immediate coherence with Toronto art may well be discernible. But it could never attain the clarity that it does in Montreal where, without oversimplification, it is possible to trace out an internal organic development over the last three decades against which more recent activity can be measured.

In so far as this is true, Toronto has remained consistently provincial. It has been continually difficult for any "style" to strike strong, self-sustaining local roots because it has usually been adopted from outside at a relatively fully developed stage. Toronto artists, without having the understanding derived from participating in the formative steps of the imported style, have been without the preconditions to develop it meaningfully in new directions, except to fuss it up where we like it or not, and we may acknowledge it as a false premise to depend too much on one's art on external models, it is nevertheless what Toronto artists have done and perhaps inevitably had to do. Is there any other way of explaining the range of eclecticism in Toronto art of the 50s and 60s and the curious ebbing and flowing at the rate of their work despite amazing technical virtuosity?

There is surely some validity to such an analysis. Yet on the whole how much do we really know about the art of those preceding decades? And that points to the second problem in focusing on Toronto art: the avoidance over the years of seriously coming to terms with it critically.

Is it not a little disgraceful that both Bush and Snow have received more informed attention outside Canada than within? And yet how symptomatic that is of Toronto's hesitancy to really look closely at what the art itself has to say. It is easier to deal with the peripheral data, especially biography. Even the best opportunities are missed. When the time came to establish the proper grounds for the study of Toronto painting in the exhibition Toronto Painting 1953-1965, the organizers of the exhibition opted, in the catalogue, for a narrative chronicle devoid of art critical or art historical analysis. The oversight was of no slight importance. Because no historical context was explored, no visual analysis performed, no standards set, licence was again given to all those little surveys and retrospectives which have followed and which persist in perpetuating a tradition of promoting the artist as friend, or the artist as personality (often with his own collaboration) when what we so badly need is dispassionate and informed consideration of the work, its historical context, its sources, its specific character and meaning.

My tone is becoming increasingly irritable. But in the light of the amount of art which Toronto produces or which otherwise passes through its galleries, we really must do better. The newspapers must rise above mere reportage in which all things are equal, and take an informed stand, whether or not it is one we individually will agree with. The more magazines, glossy or little, must become less indulgent and less self-indulgent, and intervene more provocatively into daily artistic discussion.

The arts in Toronto in the second half of the seventies are nevertheless thriving. The atmosphere is more relaxed than it was formerly. With no apparent dominant thrust shaping new directions, there is more time to explore what has preceded and what goes on around one. It is less significant to be first, or to be a star at 30. It is a mark of when an artist matured if he continues to harp on that edge of originality in his newest work. To the younger artist that component of tradition which dominates even the most important new innovative work also counts for something. It is the basis, after all, on which sturdily to establish the groundwork for what should be a long evolving and fertile career. There is no shortage of optimism in Toronto, but how productive will be the promises of the future unless we know which life is primarily devoted? We, and the artists, will know that only from the work they produce.

RECENT SCULPTURE IN TORONTO

By Walter KLEPAC

Sculpture—or, to speak more accurately, three-dimensional art in general—currently enjoys a vigorous and productive existence in Toronto, particularly among those artists who have come onto the scene within the past five to ten years. Paradoxically enough, this recent upsurge in vitality, wide-ranging diversity and, in a few cases, even genuine originality on the part of certain Toronto artists in the area of sculpture occurs at a time when many artists in other major art centres, including that of New York, have experienced an enervating loss of