Everything is Relevant

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Canadian Cultural Policy
A Problem of Metaphysics

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A quip from former Canadian prime minister William Lyon Mackenzie King (1874–1950) contends that too much geography rather than too little history afflicts Canada. Add to this the racial and ethnic diversity of the Canadian population and the problem of how to forge and project Canadian culture becomes especially difficult. But this is a problem rooted in paradox because the multicultural composition of Canada’s population was to a significant degree a consequence of its social engineering of culture that began in full force immediately after the Second World War and then developed in two principal stages.

The first stage was marked by the establishment of the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences, better known as the Massey Commission, in 1949. Massey was a two-year inquiry that had as its purpose the setting of Canadian cultural policy, including the principles of governance of communications, film, television, and arts agencies. It was instrumental in the establishment of many of Canada’s now sacrosanct institutions including the National Library (Library and Archives Canada as of 2004), and the Canada Council for the Arts. While the Commission’s report was liberally sprinkled with praise for Canada’s “variety and richness of Canadian life” that “promises a healthy resistance to the standardization which is so great a peril to modern civilization,” it was in fact a document of the intellectual anxieties of Canada’s ruling anglophone elite worried about the ascending signs of regional discontent which they believed themselves historically designated to resolve.1 Despite the constituting, albeit racially problematic, principle of Canada as a nation founded by two peoples, the English and the French, the Canadian federation has traditionally been a compact between the centre and the regions. The centre is represented by the ruling anglophone elite of Ontario along with a number of appointed Québécois aides-de-camp, and the regions would comprise the rest of Canada including Quebec. The task of the commission as it defined it was a difficult one: how to construct an identity for a nation that was comprised of isolated regions of diverse histories and to which the threat of American influences was always present.

The second stage was represented by the formal adoption in 1971 of the Multiculturalism Policy and its attendant Canadian Multiculturalism Act. The federal multiculturalism program formalized support for the idea of Canadian identity as constituted in its diversity of culture, an idea that was only implicit in Massey. Multicultural diversity was designed to be the basis of the

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cultural pillar of Canada’s foreign and domestic policy. In many ways, its logic is the inverse of Massey. The aim of Massey was about building institutions that would unify a compartmentalized nation and about underlining Canada’s historical roots in Europe, primarily Britain and France, as a means to deflect Canadians from the pernicious influences of American culture. Multiculturalism, on the other hand, is about fostering and servicing Canada’s compartmentalization by diluting the primacy of Canada’s English and French roots as a means to reflect a more congenial and less materialistic version of American culture. That Canadian society has become over time increasingly like American society was made profusely clear during the 1992 George Bush versus Bill Clinton US presidential campaign. When then-president Bush made a plea to Americans for a kinder, gentler America, political wags in both the United States and Canada were quick to reply that Canada is that kinder, gentler America.

Multiculturalism came to parallel Canada’s multilateralist voice on the international stage of politics; the former would strengthen the legitimacy of the latter. Hand in hand, a multicultural domestic policy and a multilateral international policy would ensure Canadian influence through a wide spectrum of forums such as the United Nations, the Arctic Council, NATO, La Francophonie, the British Commonwealth, and various Asia-Pacific organizations. Canada would be the primary habitus of the enlightened, democratic state, a respected and credible mediator between entities of power and entities on the margins. Multiculturalism would represent the triumph of the discourse of the citizen and demonstrate to the world the true cosmopolitanism of Canada. Domestically, it represented a political accommodation of the old anglophone elite to an emerging francophone elite. Conveniently, the country would continue to be led and administered by the perspectives of the old anglophone elite. After all, multiculturalism was their idea!

Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau (1919–2000) aggressively promoted the idea of a national culture constituted by its cultural pluralism. He argued that: “Uniformity is neither desirable nor possible in a country the size of Canada. We should not even be able to agree upon the kind of Canadian to choose as a model, let alone persuade most people to emulate it.” To those who argue that multiculturalism is a dangerous recipe for a fractiously decentralized state, Trudeau’s response was to make a virtue of the paradox. In 1970, at the annual meeting of the Canadian Press, Trudeau argued: “Canada has often been called a mosaic, but I prefer the image of a tapestry, with its many threads and colours, its beautiful shapes, its intricate subtlety. If you go behind a

2 Pierre Elliott Trudeau, The Essential Trudeau (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1998), 146. The full passage is: “Uniformity is neither desirable nor possible in a country the size of Canada. We should not even be able to agree upon the kind of Canadian to choose as a model, let alone persuade most people to emulate it. There are surely few policies potentially more disastrous for Canada than to tell all Canadians that they must be alike. There is no such thing as a model or ideal Canadian. What could be more absurd than the concept of an ‘all Canadian’ boy or girl? A society that emphasises uniformity is one which creates intolerance and hate. A society which eulogises the average citizen is one which breeds mediocrity. What the world should be seeking, and what we in Canada must continue to cherish, are not concepts of uniformity but human values: compassion, love, and understanding.”
tapestry, all you see is a mass of complicated knots. We have tied ourselves in knots, you might say. Too many Canadians only look at the tapestry of Canada that way. But if they would see it as others do, they would see what a beautiful, harmonious thing it really is.”

By no means were debates about multiculturalism solely a Canadian concern. According to the late French social philosopher Michel de Certeau (1925–1986), the idea of giving voice to minority cultures was a salient feature of the events of May 1968. Certeau believed in the “exemplary value” of the immigrant to the French state. In language with striking parallels to the Canadian Multiculturalism Act, he wrote in his seminal book, *The Capture of Speech*: “By becoming more open and more tolerant with regard to immigrants, we would also learn how to relativize our codes of conduct, our way of understanding ‘high culture,’ and this would allow us to confer on anonymous inventions the arts of practical creation and everyday culture, and on what is made by practitioners of everyday life their own cultural role.” Certeau also argued for public assistance and regional endowments to minority and regional cultures, again in language similar to official policy in Canada.

Canadian intellectuals, beginning in the post–Second World War administration of Louis St. Laurent (1882–1973) and continuing through to that of Pierre Trudeau, theorized that Canada’s own cultural landscape would develop to resemble what inevitably the global cultural landscape would become. As such, Canada would occupy the high ground of the world’s future. What is more is that multiculturalism would have the political advantage of an idea born out of difference with the United States. In lieu of America’s melting pot, Canada advanced the image of the Canadian mosaic. Rather than a culture rooted in individual sameness, Canada’s society would be rooted in consensus from difference. Or at least that was the idea. What Canada did not anticipate was a world in which nations would redefine their particular cultural and foreign interests in fundamental ways. It did not anticipate a world in which private actors would become such a threat to public functions, nor did it anticipate the resurgence of the United States in monopolizing the world’s foreign policy. Lastly, Canada did not anticipate that its agenda of multiculturalism would be resisted by the turns of history itself, as concerns about demographic balance deepened rather than abated.

The critical socio-historical period during which the contemporary discourse of Canadian culture was produced spans from the 1950s through to the beginning of the 1970s. Undoubtedly, there were many formative events in the history of Canadian culture predating this period that can be cited; for example, the founding of Canada’s first public

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3 Ibid., 177.
4 Michel de Certeau, *The Capture of Speech* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 135. Much of Certeau’s book is an analysis of the events of May 1968 with the central perspective that the events represented a collective demand for personal emancipations extending to previously unheard or unrecognized voices, a development that would lead to what he hoped would be a new culture in France.

6 The European Community was a forerunner of the European Union.

7 Foreign Publisher Advertising Services Act, Hansard, Parliament of Canada, no. 140, 22 October 1998.

Canadian cultural policy, from its inception, was guided by many elements of the Old Left’s criticism of America’s society of unfettered capitalism. Canada has always been socially democratic in its organization of its capitalist economy. Canadian intellectuals have traditionally worked in concert with the national government to formulate an intermediary position for Canada between left and right ideologies, First and Third worlds. As a contiguous neighbour of the United States, it was necessary for Canada to define its liberalism deftly, with an incomplete radio broadcaster in 1932. But the twenty years of the 1950s and 1960s represented two decades in which an unprecedented number of cultural propositions passed into legislation with the mandate of fostering, promoting, and defending Canadian cultural production and services. During this period, the federal government passed the recommendations of the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences, the Broadcasting Act, the Canada Council Act, the recommendations of the Report of the Royal Commission on Book Publishing, the Canadian Film Development Corporation Act, and the Telesat Canada Act, which established a Crown corporation to exclusively provide satellite communications services to Canadians.

Canada has the ambiguous fortune of sharing its border with the United States of America, the world’s largest producer of cultural commodities. The high standard of living enjoyed by most Canadians is a consequence of Canada’s vassal economic relationship with its southern neighbour. In matters of culture, Canada cannot make decisions without looking over its shoulder, as Canadians are ever conscious of the imperatives of their geopolitical location. In the immortal words of former Social Credit leader Robert Thompson (1914–1997), “the Americans are our best friends—whether we like it or not.”

To American eyes, cultural sovereignty is little more than another thorny issue in the litigious world of economic and trade negotiations. The degree to which cultural issues are entangled with trade issues that in turn spill into questions of national sovereignty can be illustrated with a recent ruling by the World Trade Organization against the European Community in favour of the United States on the matter of bananas. Americans cited the victory as it sought punitive actions against Canada for its legislation against “split-run” magazines that siphon off advertising revenue from smaller Canadian publications by satellite printing twice an issue of, say, *Time* magazine to accommodate advertisements from Canadian sources. Canada objects to split-run magazines because they undermine the viability of Canada’s publications industry while catering almost exclusively to American or foreign editorial content.

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character. It was an ascending view that by the late 1960s, conventional left/right divisions and definitions had been displaced by the idea of global conquest by one or the other superpower. This was a political view shared by many countries including communist ones, the most important being China, a country Canada formally recognized during the Trudeau administration to the consternation of the Untied States and well in advance of the same decision later adopted by many Western nations. The formulation for Canadian cultural policy, therefore, both in its domestic and external uses, had to be a metaphorical formulation without direct reference to specific political resolution or commitment.

Under these paradoxical conditions, in which the level of general wealth to Canadians is assured by its highly interlocked economy with the United States but at the expense of the deep moral compromise to Canada’s cultural integrity, Canada devised to constitute itself heterogeneously. Such a metaphysical response to the moral hankering of nationalism owed much to the spryly articulated ideas of Canadian thinkers such as Harold Innis (1894–1952) and Marshall McLuhan (1911–1980). During the two decades immediately following the Second World War, Innis and McLuhan propelled Canada to a leadership role in transportation and communications theory. Both were intellectually indebted to the liberal-pragmatist perspectives of John Dewey, Max Weber, and Émile Durkheim. In the case of McLuhan, there was never a glint of despair nor foreboding in his views about Canada’s place in a technologically revolutionizing world, at least, not until the end of the 1960s, when the project of developing a new cultural infrastructure was fully in place.8

McLuhan’s thoughts about a future Global Village of electronically rendered synchronic relations and the degree to which reality is shaped by the effects of media have proven brilliantly prescient. While cautious about the possible danger posed by changing technologies, McLuhan was generally positive in his outlook of its applications. He said in 1961 that, “the compressional, implosive nature of the new electric technology is retrogressing Western Man back from the open plateaus of literate values and into the heart of tribal darkness, into what Joseph Conrad termed ‘the Africa within.’”9 Such an idea was taken as a directive by Canadian policymakers to ensure that Canada maintained a position of mediation between an increasingly communications-based modernity that signalled the advent of what has come to be known as globalization and fundamentalist reactions which could lead to the return

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of ultra-nationalist sentiments. Presaging such a role for Canada and the implementation of multiculturalism as a policy of state, McLuhan said: “Individual talents and perspectives don’t have to shrivel within a retribalized society; they merely interact within a group consciousness that has the potential for releasing far more creativity than the old atomized culture. Literate man is alienated, impoverished man; retribalized man can lead a far richer and more fulfilling life—not the life of a mindless drone but of the participant in a seamless web of interdependence and harmony.”

Also in 1961, McLuhan predicted during an address to the Humanities Association of Canada that the arts and sciences in Canada would experience an era of unprecedented accomplishment. Many Canadians, including the burgeoning numbers of separatist nationalists in Quebec, shared McLuhan’s optimism, albeit with different objectives in mind.

That same year saw the publication of Jane Jacobs’s (1916–2006) seminal book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, one of the most influential books in the history of urban studies. Her indictment of the failure of urban life in America, which she attributed to a general moral failure in American society as a whole, was a case lesson for Canadians who by and large lived in far safer and cleaner cities. Many of the problems confronting the United States seemed to elude Canada. While the razing of the Pruitt–Igoe housing project in St. Louis, Missouri, the poster child of America’s failed housing projects, evoked the twin scourges of poverty and racism, Canada showed off Habitat at Expo 67, Moshe Safdie’s (b. 1938) innovative and supposedly inexpensive housing solution for the world.

McLuhan’s gibe that “Canada is a Third-World country” seemed a small price to pay in exchange for a sense of smug superiority over Canada’s superpower neighbour. Canadians felt prideful of their country and of their prime minister, Lester B. Pearson (1897–1972), who had won a Nobel Peace Prize in 1957 for his role in mediating the end of the Suez Crisis. The Pearson achievement was taught to Canadian schoolchildren as an example of the manner in which Canada would seek self-definition, through support for multilateralism in its outward voice and multiculturalism in its domestic voice.

The apogee of Canadian self-confidence came in 1967 in Montreal during Expo 67 with its utopian theme of “Man and His World.” In the centenary year of Canada’s founding, a world-class exposition took place that projected a remarkable range of ideas on improving the future of humanity through the use of new and emerging electronic advances. The spirit of McLuhan, Innis,
Glenn Gould (1932–1982), Safdie, and Pearson permeated the fair, not to mention Buckminster Fuller (1895–1983), Lewis Mumford (1895–1990) (the National Film Board of Canada had produced six films based on his ideas about the history of urbanity), and Alvin Toffler (1928–2016). By 1967, McLuhan was in monthly consultations with Pierre Trudeau, then an important member of Pearson’s cabinet.\textsuperscript{14} The optimism of the centennial celebrations carried over into 1968 with the election of the youthful and worldly Trudeau, while the conclusion of the “summer of love” of 1967 in the United States ushered in one of the most violently radicalized and apocalyptic years in American history. It became a Canadian cliché of 1968 to mention the stories of Canadians watching American cities burn from the comforts of their homes just across the border. That same year, Jane Jacobs would herself make the move to Canada, settling in Toronto, a city she has consistently praised for its urban fabric. To Canadians, the future could not seem brighter. This applied to Quebec as well, where the future seemed assured despite often divisive and vigorous debates among that province’s intelligentsia about how best to fulfill Quebec’s rendezvous with destiny.\textsuperscript{15}

Unlike Canada today, passenger train travel was still important in 1967, and many Canadians travelled by rail to the Montreal exposition. For those who could not visit the fair, the fair would come to them. An important adjunct to Expo 67 was several so-called Confederation Trains that traversed the nation in every direction that the cross-continental

\textsuperscript{14} Marchand, Marshall McLuhan, 196.

\textsuperscript{15} See Pierre Berton’s 1967: Canada’s Turning Point (Toronto: Seal Books, 1997) for a discussion of Quebec nationalist sentiments erupting during the controversial visit of French president Charles De Gaulle to Expo 67 and his exhortation of “Vive le Québec libre!” Equally agitational was the publication of Pierre Vallières’s manuscript White Niggers of America. Vallières’s text was another clarion cry for the separation of Quebec from Canada. It garnered significant sympathy from independence groups the world over, including many voices from non-aligned countries.
railway tracks would lead them. The bridging of the Canadian expanse by train is an important symbol of almost mythic dimension in the narrative of Canada. The Confederation Trains, redolent in mythic connotations of Canadia, were in essence an updated version of the agitprop trains of the early Soviet period. Symbolically, they presaged the establishment of a nationwide network of art collectivities emanating from the centre and extending to the farthest margins. They also issued the hope of a future released from regional tensions, including regional nationalism, through a horizontally syndicated state that could respond to all parts of the country and all minority groups within it in non-hierarchical and non-conforming ways.

The operating framework for art in Canada was developed, in part, as a critique of the American art system. At precisely the time when the infrastructure for Canada’s publicly funded artists’ gallery networks was near completion in the early 1970s, there was much concurrent debate about the collapse of art in a social environment which blamed modernist concepts and rationalizations for the many failings in America’s urban life. In art, the early 1970s heralded the arrival of high modernism’s point of reductio ad absurdum. Conceptual art’s iconoclastic, aesthetic politics was as much a critical response to the mounting phenomenon of globalization and its pressures to disperse previously concentrated cultural discourses as it was a symbol of what Jean-François Lyotard has called “universal finality.”

The idea of the end of art or, at least, of the old system of art, appealed to those Canadians who saw this as an historical occasion for Canada to advance a better model, one in which Canadian art and culture could be appreciated through domestically developed criteria. Paradoxically, the Canadian model could serve as an example to the world. Certain nationalists of Canada have expressed the hope that within such an indigenously produced model, aesthetic formalism would cease to be of significant interest to Canadian artists, citing it as an asocial characteristic endemic to contemporary American art. In language that unwittingly echoes the justification for socialist realism, Canadian writer Tom Henighan (b. 1934) has argued that art-for-art’s-sake movements would be of less importance in the absence of a flagrantly materialist environment and a powerful elite of private patrons. Canada’s art system would encourage the development of aesthetic heterogeneity and cultural diversity. Canadian art would escape the contradictions of foreign-developed ideas of high culture and the “social corruption of capitalism.”

In 1969, the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax emerged as the most important art education institution in Canada with a reputation that transcended into the international art arena. Its
program was deeply supportive of conceptual art, and the school kept a residency studio in New York City.\(^{18}\) In terms of national identity, it was a time of supreme self-confidence among Canadian artists who were generally open to those features of the new American and European art that could proffer lessons for Canadian art. On the other side of the country that same year, Image Bank was founded in Vancouver. Again, its development was a response to an American model, namely Ray Johnson’s (1927–1995) New York Correspondence School.\(^{19}\) Again, Canadian artists would take from American art what useful lessons it offered for Canadian art. It is important to be reminded here just how late the idea of modern and contemporary art was in arriving and establishing a modicum of national consciousness in Canada. Prior to the 1950s, artistic modernity in Canada still meant an attachment to landscape painting and other traditional cultural norms of art.

Image Bank borrowed its title from a statement by Claude Lévi-Strauss: “The decision that everything must be taken account of facilitates the creation of an image bank.”\(^{20}\) Its spirit consistent with André Malraux’s concept of a museum without walls, albeit without Malraux’s standard-bearer framing of high culture, Image Bank sought to extend art through the postal and other communications systems such as the Telex. It stated the goals in almost Baudrillardian terms sans the double meanings: “As artists we are information, resource, image banks concerned with data covering the spectrum from cultural awareness to professional knowledge, understanding the overall image into potential has enabled us to develop formats which allow maximum involvement while remaining impartial to the specific kinds of information in process, creating a valid information economy.”\(^{21}\)

What is noteworthy here is the parallelism between national artistic development and national economic policy, a conflation that has never met with much concern among Canadian artists, all too eager to accept government largesse without critical reflection on its possible constraints on artistic independence. The American artist Vito Acconci (1940–2017) has written that “the electronic age redefines public as a composite of privates.” Acconci worried about the dystopian side of the promise of communications, the image, and the spectacle. He worried about the electronic age taking control out of individual hands and placing it “in the will of the other, whether that other is called God or Magic or The Corporation or The Government.”\(^{22}\) In Canada, the conventional view among most artists, with regard to the question of art and culture, is that the government is good.

And why not? Canadian artists knew a good thing when they saw it. Since the first artist-run centre opened in Toronto in 1971, the network of artist-run centres has expanded to nearly every part of the country.

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19 Ibid., 41.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

Almost entirely assisted by public funds, these venues, from their inception, would highlight multimedia art, performance, installation art, some feminist and racially based art, and other art with a socially critical point of view. Many were endowed with the most advanced video and computing equipment of the time. Canadian artists would be drawn to these centres in lieu of private galleries, which were few in number and generally conservative in what they exhibited.

As such, there was a particular look or at least approach to Canadian art predicated on the idea of aesthetic dissemination, technical literacy, and social concerns, primarily issues of identity through space and time. Somewhat ironically, as the New York and European art world loses some of its drawing power due to dissemination of contemporary interest in the rest of the world, it still retains its influence through more horizontally conceived syndication of its structure. This contradiction, somewhat Canadian in character, has resulted in irony. International art now looks very much like Canadian art has looked since the 1970s and 80s, adopting many of the formal strategies long developed and employed by Canadian artists.

In a perfect cradle-to-coffin scenario, a Canadian artist in 1980 could conceivably receive a financial grant from the government to produce work, which could then be shown in an artist-run space from which the artist would receive an exhibition fee and perhaps a residency stipend. The artist could get to the place of exhibition with assistance from a travel grant. Afterward, the artist could make a submission to the Canada Council Art Bank to purchase the exhibited art. A jury comprised of other artists, each representative of a region in Canada, would make a decision about the purchase. If, at some future time, the artist wanted to repurchase work sold to the Art Bank, he or she needed only to pay the original purchase price plus a supplementary charge for storage, maintenance, and administration for the period that the work was kept in the Art Bank. The important point is that at every stage of the hypothetical but highly possible scenario, Canadian artists are the ones to don the hats of the curator, the critic, and the collector. In the name of a non-hierarchical system of artistic measurement, Canadian artists would be evaluated first and foremost by Canadian artists, peer groups in effect, without the need to rely on expert opinions from non-artists. An adverse effect of all this, intended or otherwise, has been a concomitant weakness in terms of the quality, size, and dedication of Canada’s corps of curators and art critics. To wit, the complete absence of any book that critically and theoretically addresses in a historically comprehensive manner developments in Canadian art over the last thirty years. Dennis Reid’s (b. 1943) A Concise History of Canadian Painting of 1973 is the last
useful book to comprehensively examine an important component of Canadian art, that of painting. It does not cover developments in Canadian painting beyond 1965.

No one has understood the condition of contemporary art in Canada more than General Idea. If good art must lend understanding to the life and times of the environment from which it emerged, then General Idea are perhaps the most important Canadian artists of the multicultural era. The art of General Idea has been a consistent expression of all the best and worst characteristics of Canadian artistic culture, including its bureaucratic proclivities. With the utmost in self-conscious aplomb and grant-writing skills, the art activities of General Idea have mirrored the logic of the Canadian cultural infrastructure in all its branches from publications to art-production centre. Bureaucracy loves nothing better than to see its own image extended, even if the terms of the extension include mockery.

Fittingly, for all its attributes, General Idea always remained but a conception, an invented cultural corporation that in many ways does not exist and never did exist. The same might be said of Toronto, Canada’s de facto art centre. Speaking in praise of the artistic culture in his home base of Toronto, AA Bronson (b. 1946), a member of General Idea, stated: "As for Toronto’s diversity, it is clear that Toronto has no specific regional characteristics. It is rather a mosaic of regional characteristics from other parts of the country, here thrust into discontinuous disarray. Toronto is the only Canadian city in which the art scene is continually fracturing, and thrives by that fracturing." Bronson’s malapropism is a testament to what Canadian historian Jack Granatstein (b. 1939) has quoted from Gad Horowitz (b. 1936): “Multiculturalism is the masochistic celebration of Canadian nothingness.” In deference to Trinh T. Minh-ha’s (b. 1952) notion of “the Centre is a Margin,” Canada’s artistic centre is neither a centre nor a margin; it is but a centrifuge, a study for specialists in chaos theory.

Today, Canadian culture is beleaguered, and everything from multiculturalism to foreign aid to public support for cultural institutions such as the venerable Canadian Broadcasting Corporation is up for dismantling, reduced to skeletal frames by funding cuts. Worse is the bankruptcy of ideas regarding a retort and a new raison d’être that could provide discursive weight to countering the attacks and not merely defending from them. Defenders of the old status quo err in the belief that the re-establishment of firmer levels of funding would solve all woes. For example, the temporary reprieve...
from funding cuts to institutions such as the Canada Council has not meant that the ideological wars against such institutions have gone away. Global multiculturalism has become a global marketplace of culture, perpetuated constantly by Hollywood, Disney, and McDonald’s, and despite good intentions, it is a development Canada cannot stand against alone.

Why this is happening has much to do with the logic of capitalist developments and the collapse of a credible left voice in the world scene. But perhaps it also has something to do with the contradictions in Canadian cultural policy, contradictions that can no longer withstand the weight of the realpolitik of globalization. The numerous official acts and legislation involved in the development and defence of Canadian cultural services were intended as a bulwark against what Canadians perceived as the dangerous mass appeal and marketing prowess of American perspectives. The majority of Canadians saw support for federally assisted cultural entities as indispensable services that assured the protection of their cultural interests. Even more impressive is the fact that there has not been a single Canadian artist of consequence in the last thirty years who has not benefitted significantly from Canadian government financial assistance in one manner or another—not a single one. Of course, on the other hand, this is also a measure of the degree of insinuation by the government into cultural affairs.

In a world in which cultural issues are increasingly arbitrated under the rules of the World Trade Organization or economic pacts such as the North American Free Trade Agreement, Canada’s insistence on the right to exert sovereignty over cultural matters is now viewed with ascend-ant objection by laissez-faire economists as a line in the sand against global free trade. In addition, by revoking the hegemonic assumptions of Canada’s two founding nations document, that is, as a country founded by the English and the French, multiculturalism was intuitively counter-discursive. Multiculturalism as a national policy is inherently hostile to the idea of nation while paradoxically it sponsors an idea of essential differences between cultural groups. Frantz Fanon has written extensively about the dialectical linkage between nation and culture, that the absence of the former necessarily leads to the emaciation of the latter. As a result, Canadian cultural actions have become increasingly defensive and paralyzed, philosophically confused about how best to escape the textual trap set by not only the discourses inscribed in the GATT, the WTO, and other economic contracts, but by its own historical and rhetorical contradictions.

Que faire? In 1965, in the midst of rising Canadian triumphalism regarding Canada’s cultural and intellectual identity, John Porter
(1921–1979) published his seminal book, *The Vertical Mosaic.* Porter’s book was a sweeping and highly detailed analysis of social and economic inequality in Canada; it has since become the primer for subsequent Canadian sociological studies. As implied by the book’s title, Canada’s official rhetoric of a cultural mosaic masks the pernicious degree to which Canadian society is vertically conceived and administered, from the top down. As a somewhat inverted but analogous comparison, the organizational functioning of Canadian art and culture appears non-hierarchical and horizontally efficacious, but what is masked is the protean and assimilative character of its Officialdom.

Lawrence Meir Friedman (b. 1930) has decried the rootless and atomized character of American life as a “horizontal society” *in extremis.* The anomie of contemporary American life is linked to a visual culture dominated by the corporate ethos, a connection that Friedman repeatedly points out but is unable to blame. As Canadian society evolves to resemble the greater social detachment of American society, Canadian art and culture continues to define, on behalf of the state, the old rhetoric of an increasingly phlegmatic and false Canadian polity.

Given what I have called the metaphysical nature of cultural identity in Canada, any final answer to the problem must include change in the way that cultural identity has been posed and responded to philosophically. In practical terms, certain questions need to be addressed. Is it possible, for example, to recognize artists who happen to come from particular regions—with regional situations which have added to an understanding of their art—as artists first, rather than the syndication of artist and region? Is it possible to have a selection process—for, say, the Venice Biennale—not be perceived as a contest of regional redress? Is it possible to see that the present system of definition and structure fails to address the reality of younger Canadian artists by perpetuating a reality of Canadian culture that no longer exists? Many more questions can and need to be asked. To every question, there can only be a singular response, one and the same—yes.

**2011 Addendum**

I should think that at this point in time in the context of a globalized contemporary art scene the question of defining art as an outcome of national character is outdated. It was always a problematic question to begin with since any answer would have been

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30 For an interesting analysis of the co-optation of Canadian culture by administration, see Krzysztof Wodiczko’s presentation of 14 June 1983 to a Toronto art audience and later published in the April/May 1994 issue of *Parallelogramme*, the official journal of Canada’s alternative gallery network.
a function of a nation’s sense of officialdom. Lawren Harris’s programmatic edict that the natural landscape of Canada constitutes what is peculiar to Canadian art elides the many disjunctions and contestations that vexed Canadian national identity at the beginning of the twentieth century. The question is doubly problematic because it implies the conflation of culture with national identity. This invariably leads to notions of “shared values” or “common social purpose.” Such terms become the province of those vested with the power and influence to define a national identity. Far from being inclusive terms, they provide a justification for the othering of those who do not conform.

Marshall McLuhan saw the lack of an identity as a distinctively Canadian attribute. He declared that, “Canada is the only country in the world that knows how to live without an identity.” The Canadian architect Arthur Erickson argued that Canada’s lack of national identity would “prove to be our strength in the next century as the world moves toward a humanity-wide consciousness.” He suggests that by having “no history of cultural or political hegemony—almost no history at all to hinder us—we are welcomed over all other nations. We are more open to, curious about, and perceptive of other cultures.” Of course, such an innocence can only be presumed when there is no acknowledgement of the long history of First Nations presence in what is now Canada.

As I have tried to argue, the lack of a strong identity as an attribute could not be resolved within the political framework and historical constitution of Canada. Ironically, much contemporary art, including by leading Canadian artists, is asserting just this viewpoint of McLuhan and Erickson, producing art in the context of increasingly complex, globalized, and nationalist contingencies.