

Canadian Neo-Dada

**Ryan Arnott
Elizabeth Barrett-Milner
machyderm inc.
Blair Marten
Eric Metcalfe
Steve Nunoda
Daniel Olson
K.D. Thornton**

Curator: Robert McKaskell

**Art Gallery of Windsor
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In 1913 Marcel Duchamp made the first Dada object by mounting a bicycle fork and wheel on a kitchen stool. It was, he later said, "something to have in my room the way you have a fire, or a pencil sharpener, except that there was no usefulness. It was a pleasant gadget, pleasant for the movement it gave."¹ This was three years before the name "Dada" became associated with art.

It was a group of artists who came together in Zurich in 1916, giving performances and exhibiting works in their Cabaret Voltaire, who applied the word Dada to their activity. They were in Switzerland because it had remained neutral during WWI, a war they considered appalling for its brutality. Disgusted by the complacent conservatism of the European

bourgeoisie, they challenged both its philosophy and its art through their actions and creations. The Dada spirit unleashed in Zurich spread to Paris, Berlin, Cologne, Hamburg and New York by 1919. Central to all manifestations of Dada was a



Blair Marten, \$75.00 2000

questioning of the conventions of art as they were understood both by most "art lovers" and by the painters and sculptors who provided them with the objects that decorated their homes and museums.

The great misunderstanding that developed concerning Dada during most of the last century was that it was "anti-art." Certainly the Dadas were against the highfalutin art of aesthetes, the easy art of avant-garde picture-makers, the unthinking art of sumptuous decorators, and the simple-minded art of entertainers. Using humour, shock tactics, and unfettered imagination, they redefined art so that it could include whatever the artist chose to do. The debris of life, simple activities, an idea — everything became potential material for the artist to manipulate. While a pervasive sense of humour informed much of their work, rather than being against art, they were serious about expanding the role of art in society.

Given the hold of the Group of Seven's cautious experiments in art through the first half of the last century, Canada was slow to accept abstract painting, let alone to respond to the revolution in art proposed by Dada. *Making It New! (the big sixties show)*,



Ryan Arnott, Untitled installation 2000

exhibited at the Art Gallery of Windsor last summer, showed the results of the first wave of the Dada spirit in Canada during the 1960s. Using wit, surprise and subversion to comment on the current social condition, the nine artists represented in *Canadian Neo-Dada²* show how the Dada spirit continues to inspire artists today.

Eric Metcalfe and Blair Marten give subversive responses to museum

practice, readings of art history and the commodification of art. Metcalfe exactly replicates the form of an ancient Greek amphora, decorating it with his Neo-Brute motif. Displayed in a museum case, the modern-day amphora spoofs the preciousness of the original. But Metcalfe adds another twist. At least his "museum object" will last. The energetic (and labour-intensive) mural that extends and expands the decorative motif of the amphora along more than fifty feet of wall will be painted over at the end of the exhibition. Which has more interest/value: the enduring pot or the ephemeral painting?



Eric Metcalfe, *Neo-Brute* 2000

At a flea market prices are often subject to negotiation. When Blair Marten saw that a flea market vendor had stapled his prices to lengths of 2x4 lumber, he figured that the prices were, in fact, fixed. By appropriating a price marker and bringing it to the gallery, he suggests that the price of art is also fixed. But how solid are the prices? Rather than placing the found object on a covered pedestal, he attaches it to the wall. The plexiglas over \$75.00 frames it as art but does not serve to protect it. The art of the twentieth century, historicised as one "ism" following another, is the subject of another of Marten's works. *#One Ism* is a twelve foot tall pedestal with a sharply angled top. History is a slippery slope.

Puns and the combination of common objects in unusual ways were ploys often used by the original Dadas to reveal new meanings. Elizabeth Barrett-Milner, a shoemaker by trade, invests simple shoe forms with humour that is sometimes anthropomorphic and other times verbal. In *Go Go Go*, the bustle of urban life is clearly represented through forty-seven shoes hurrying down a ramp. *Freudian Slipper*, a shoe covered in green leather attached with cobblers' nails to recall the psychiatrist's couch, suggests that we have a cobbled understanding of the myths Freud introduced to us about our subconscious mind.



Elizabeth Barrett-Milner, *Freudian Slipper* 1999

Ryan Arnott combines older works, objects from his studio and the peculiarities of his assigned space in the gallery to make a new installation. By cutting the form of a ladder from the existing carpeting and extending it to the ceiling where it disappears in a hole surrounded by tiles covered in astroturf, and by cladding parts of the walls with exterior vinyl siding in which cloud shapes are cut, he metaphorically turns the space upside down and inside out. This echoes his earlier works that bring together elements of separate objects — hammer/broom, scissors/pliers and screwdriver/beater — to suggest new readings of use.

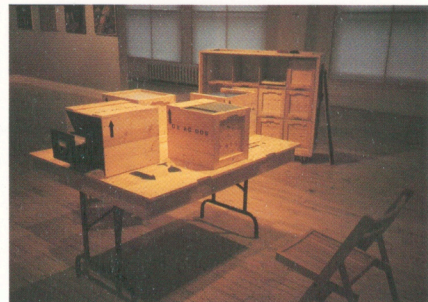
Fascinated by our high-tech society, Karen Thornton uses its resources to comment on contemporary life. In *Rx7* she presents pharmaceutical products that "cure" the ancient seven deadly sins. To cure lust, for

example, she offers Viagra[®], and for vanity, Propecia[®], a drug taken by males to prevent hair loss. There is a sedative, Xanax[®], to control anger and a weight loss pill, Xenical[®], to prevent gluttony. For *mE.coli*, she cultures her own enterobacteria in petri dishes to develop a series of seven drawings that move from the form of a single cell through the shape of a human to the stars in the universe. Without bacteria we could not live, yet we seem to hear only of their destructive capacities.



K.D. Thornton, *Rx7* 2000

Steve Nunoda's *Amnesia Cases*, a crate which houses twelve separate cases of which only four are on view at any given time, is a challenge to memory and the associations it allows. One case always on view contains a card index containing 75 cards with cross-referenced anecdotes and definitions. One can look up the card which refers to the other individual cases. C2 AC 009, for example, is titled "Cabinet." After a brief statement, there is the notation "see case, vitrine."



Steve Nunoda, *Amnesia Cases* 1996-2000

The cards for Case and Vitrine lead one to other cards which in turn lead one to still other cards. Travelling through this Borgesian index is like reading a post-modern novel, and yet one always returns to the physical evidence of the case that initiated the journey. Nunoda writes that the cases "are like a brain — a network of neurons — waiting for a random thought to fire across them, but the intelligence and the meanings produced are provided by the mind of a spectator."³

Although the first performance piece probably occurred when a human, having become conscious of walking on the earth, purposely altered his or her step or pace, it was the Zurich Dadas who forged a contemporary link between the visual arts and actions. In Daniel Olson's installation, *L'homme qui marche est un cause libre*, several objects that can produce sounds are suspended from the ceiling. Dressed in an old suit and wearing a felt hat, he will arrive unannounced in the gallery at various times during the course of the exhibition, remove an object and take it for a walk in the shopping mall in which the gallery is located. Without overtly drawing attention to himself, he will appear anomalous in the setting. He writes: "I hope to present situations that don't fit neatly into the flow of everyday life. I've always thought of my performance work as a kind of public service — it's free entertainment for anyone interested or perplexed enough to stop, look and listen, before getting on with their day. Even twenty seconds can be memorable. Maybe in that brief moment they'll catch a fleeting glimpse of freedom."⁴

machyderm inc. is a collaboration by Chris McNamara and Dermot Wilson. In their performance, *Rant Rotation Part II: Up There, Down Here...*, in addition to Wilson performing as a cabaret entertainer telling stories about the "rich and famous" (in this case the "stars" of the Canadian art world) while McNamara, as an ersatz DJ, mixes "devilish" and "angelic"

music, there are three video projections. One, small and backlit, shows McNamara and Wilson "exhorting the audience to do immoral things or to do the right things or simply to get up and DO things."⁵ The other two, projected on a long narrow screen, collage documentary material, tape made by the artists, and live footage of Wilson's performance. Does our culture recognize our artists the way it does our sports stars? Well, no. But why not?

For those whose definition of art is "painting and sculpture" *Canadian Neo-Dada* is a confusing exhibition. Marcel Duchamp said, "I was interested in ideas — not merely in visual products. I wanted to put painting once again at the service of the mind."⁶ That approach to art propelled the most significant art of the twentieth century. It propels the work in this exhibition.

Robert McKaskell
Curator of Historical Art and Collections, Art Gallery of Windsor

¹ Quoted in Calvin Tomkins, *Duchamp: A Biography* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, Inc., 1996), p. 133.

² The term "Neo-Dada" has been used to describe a body of American art made between the heyday of Abstract Expressionism, around 1955, and the arrival of Pop art in 1962. This was the subject of the exhibition *Neo-Dada: Redefining Art 1958-62* (New York: The American Federation of Arts, 1994). Since there was no earlier Dada movement in Canada, Canadian critics called work of the 1960s "Dada" rather than "Neo-Dada." See *Making It New! (the big sixties show)* (Windsor: Art Gallery of Windsor, 2000). It seems appropriate to call the work in this exhibition "Canadian Neo-Dada" since it differs from its American counterpart of decades ago and since its Canadian roots have led to unique manifestations.

³ Artist's Statement, 2000. This extends Duchamp's notion that interpretations of art are "only interesting when you consider the man who wrote the interpretation." Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp* (New York: The Viking Press, 1971), p. 42.

⁴ Artist's statement, 2000.

⁵ Letter to the author from Dermot Wilson, June 18, 2000.

⁶ Marcel Duchamp, "Painting . . . at the service of the mind," in Herschel B. Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), p. 394.



machyderm inc., video stills from *Rant Rotation Part II: Up There, Down Here...* 2000



Daniel Olson, *Cause Libre* 2000

Canadian Neo-Dada

LIST OF WORKS

RYAN ARNOTT

Untitled installation 2000

ELIZABETH BARRETT-MILNER

Snowshoes 1998

styrofoam, thread, tissue paper

Freudian Slipper 1999

cedar, brass, leather

Go Go Go 1999

cedar, pine, spruce

Gulliver's Shoe 1999

wood, oil stick, brass, linen

Lookout Shoe 1999

wood, brass, linen

Meeting 1999

pine, martini glass

Monument 1999

wood, cobbling nails, linen

Prayer 2000

pine, latex, varnish

She Prickled At the Idea 2000

pine, finishing nails, shoe dye

MACHYDERM INC.

Rant Rotation Part II:

Up There, Down Here... 2000

performance

BLAIR MARTEN

Two aspects 1998

press release photocopies

Bachelor Machine 2000

power bar, light

ADAPTED FROM:

White Power 1997

power bar

#One Ism 2000

plinth

One Sweet Piece 2000

candy display box, string, 7 lbs. of Smarties

ADAPTED FROM:

Untitled 1996

candy display box, string

Rubbing One Brand Together 2000

flashlight, retail packaging, light

ADAPTED FROM:

Rubbing Two Brands Together 1996

flashlight, retail packaging

\$75.00 2000

hand-made sign from flea-market

Surfacing 2000

ceramic toilet tank-top, toilet cover,

empty drink container and cap

ERIC METCALFE

Neo-Brute 2000

amphora and mural

STEVE NUNODA

Amnesia Cases 1996-2000

mixed media

DANIEL OLSON

Cause Libre 2000

installation with audio and performances

Boardwalk 1997

audio with speakers

Performance objects:

Sewing Machine Case 1992

sewing machine case, parts from toy pianos

Silver Saxophone 1995

plastic toy

Looking for Giselda 1996

cardboard megaphone

Citizen Cane 1998

wooden cane, bicycle bell

Talking Tube 1999

parts from musical toys, packing tape

Tune in a Bucket 1999

metal pail, music box

Longhorn 2000

bicycle horn, plastic tube, gaffer tape

Mystery & Melancholy 2000

bicycle rim, aluminum rod

Coloured Plates 1995

installation with performance

approximately 900 metal keys from toy

xylophones, wooden crate, wooden table, hat

K.D. THORNTON

prone 1998

cardiac pacemaker, lamp,

Corelle Livingware® plate, water

Elementary pARTicle 2000

computer projection

mE.Coli 2000

enterobacteria, agar, petri dish (in progress)

Rx7 2000

magnifying glasses, waterslide decal on:

Ritalin® (amphetamine)

Xanax® (sedative)

Viagra®

Propecia® (hairloss prevention)

Lithium

Xenical® (weight loss aid)

Prozac®

AGW

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