

Iain Baxter
**PRODUCTS, PLACE,
PHENOMENON**

Art Gallery of Windsor March 30 - June 9, 1996

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introduction

I don't remember when I first encountered the work of Iain Baxter. I'm sure I would have seen it on the cover of *Art in America* in 1969. The cover was a reproduction of a slide sheet of works by the N.E. Thing Co. with such ubiquitous images as a line of cement curb barrier slabs, the Columbia Glacier in Alberta and one of Robert Morris' felt pieces, all declared to be "Aesthetically Claimed Things," and modest earth works like a V-shaped trench filled with gravel. But I probably was aware of it before that through *artscanada* where it was often discussed. The cover of the June/July 1967 issue showed a custom-built, inflated plastic bag, complete with compartments for water, air and toy boats that represented the landscape of Canada's east and west coasts by the N.E. Thing Co. Having lived in the United States between 1963 and 1974, Canadian art of the period was not particularly on my mind, but the work of the N.E. Thing Co., the joint venture in art that Iain operated with his first wife, Ingrid, was something we talked about when I lived there because it seemed so tuned to the earth/process/conceptual art movements that preoccupied us at the time.

When I came back to Canada to teach at the University of Western Ontario in 1974, Iain and Ingrid were among the first artists I invited to London to speak to my students. By then I had caught up on their career and understood how important they had been for the development of new thinking about art in Vancouver and, indeed, across the country. All I remember about their visit was that they talked

about synchronized swimming (Ingrid) and drawings of wildlife (Iain). Of course they also talked about some of their work of the 1960s and I seem to remember mention of their idea for a restaurant (Eye Scream opened in Vancouver in 1977), and back-lit Cibachrome prints. Their presentation certainly was eclectic. Nevertheless, they had an impact on my students. One actually rented a space and, mimicking the *Bagged Place* that Iain had done at the UBC Fine Arts Gallery in 1966 (he turned the Gallery into an apartment in which every object, even a turd in the toilet, was enclosed in plastic bags), covered all of its surfaces with corrugated paper.

The next time I met Iain was in the mid-1980s, on the train travelling between Windsor and London. By then Ingrid and the N.E. Thing Co. were the stuff of art history (the company and the marriage had been disbanded in 1978) and so, I thought, was Iain. After all, hadn't he sold out by becoming a "creative consultant" to the Labatt Brewing Company in 1983?

Iain moved to Windsor; I moved to Winnipeg. I next saw him in 1995 when I was researching Canada's art of the 1960s. We had a terrific day together. He was full of ideas and suggestions and wild digressions. "Uh huh," I thought, "that's just the way he was the other times I met him. All over the place. Fascinating." Later that year he called me to say that I really should come to Windsor to take a curatorial position at the Art Gallery. I was ready to move, and I thought that if he were here the place must be interesting.

My first project for the Art Gallery of Windsor was organizing *Iain Baxter: Products, Place, Phenomena* with my new colleague, Helga Pakasaar. Vincent Varga had initiated the project in 1994 and Helga, his successor, had completed all the preliminary arrangements. We had just one month to make the final selection of work. On every studio visit he presented more work that we had to include because it was important. "No, Iain," we'd argue, "we're trying to develop an exhibition. Of course all of your work is important, but there's only so much space in the Gallery, and our goal is to produce a show that lets each work have some meaning within a coherent whole. That's our job. We have to edit." Not only did we have to contend with the plethora of completed work; every day, it seemed, Iain had a proposal for a new work for the exhibition. He was irrepressible. "I've got this great idea and I'll have the piece done by next week," he'd say. "No," we'd say. "We have to get this organized." Nevertheless, he'd do the piece and we'd include it. The process was actually exhilarating. Back in 1977, in a review of the N.E. Thing Co.'s restaurant Eye Scream ("Cheap it's not, but the food is among the best I've tasted in this town, and there's no question about Eye Scream being an entertaining place to spend an evening," concluded the reviewer) Iain is quoted, "I don't want this place to ever be finished. It should be an ongoing project with all kinds of participants." As we went to press with this catalogue Iain changed the title of one of the pieces that had been made two years ago. I

suggested a modification to the change. He accepted my suggestion. For Iain, everything is open to discussion and change; nothing is "finished" until the show opens, the text is in the press, the image is framed.

In his essay for the catalogue of the survey of works by the N.E. Thing Co. produced by the UBC Fine Arts Gallery in 1993, David P. Silcox wrote, "People say to me that what Baxter was doing five years ago was pretty good, but that they don't like what he has done recently. They've been saying it for twenty-five years now. The reason Baxter stays ahead is because he stays alive. He provokes himself before he goads others. And he prods others because his job as an artist is to get people to question themselves. It's the only way most people can tell they're alive." It can be uncomfortable to be prodded, but, being prodded, a person might move. Baxter's art prods society. Sometimes society moves a little.

Robert McKaskell
Curator of Historical Art

Iain Baxter's comments on his work were culled from interviews with Robert McKaskell and Christine Goodchild. The Goodchild interview formed the basis for a video tape, Iain Baxter: Products, Place, Phenomenon, which is available from the Art Gallery of Windsor.