

Now Bulletin: Artworks, Letters and Printed Matter from the Garry Neill Kennedy Collection 1968 – 2019, Griffin Art Projects, Vancouver

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Memory is a funny thing... To call it plainly “subjective” is an understatement of a much more complicated phenomenon.

Memory often hinges on specific sounds or smells to trigger deep-felt emotions that bring forgotten moments to our consciousness. At other times, a certain place will bring back the thought of an event long past, or the recollection of a friend that has since moved away. Artworks are another potent prompt for remembering people or things seen, felt, or experienced at one time or another.

With this in mind, I set out to discover Griffin Art Projects’ exhibition, *Now Bulletin: Artworks, Letters and Printed Matter from the Garry Neill Kennedy Collection 1968–2019*. The exhibition was culled from the private collection of Garry Neill Kennedy, spanning over fifty years of collecting and art-making, since his appointment as President of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD) in Halifax in 1967.

NSCAD attained legendary status in the ‘70s for putting together The Halifax Conference, the first major conference on Minimalism in 1970, securing the school’s role within the international discourses of conceptual art. This status was furthered by David Askevold’s Projects Class from 1968–1974, and the school’s Visiting Artists Program. In July 1973, Les Levine wrote in *Art in America* that NSCAD was considered perhaps the best art school in North America.

Consequently, NSCAD was a thriving conceptualist hotspot. The outpouring of artistic production from both the Lithography Workshop and the NSCAD Press, to the generation of artists, curators, and educators who graduated during those choice years, formed an enduring legacy of artistic influence spanning the continent, which is still recognized today. Case in point, the guest curator of *Now Bulletin* is former NSCAD student David MacWilliam, who also helped Kennedy assemble a preliminary chronology of the events

that occurred at the college between 1968–1978. This work later culminated in the publication, *The Last Art College: Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1968–1978* (2012), a 455-page book authored by Kennedy and published by MIT Press to document the history of the college during this formative era.

The international notoriety that the institution garnered at the time was the direct result of Kennedy’s vision as President. And in turn, his administrative position became the focal point of many of his own conceptual art projects during those years and thereafter, questioning the very nature of institutional structures. Even *The Last Art College* can now be considered an extension of his art practice; I was expecting to see the publication presented as part of the exhibition but did not—though it was mentioned in the accompanying catalogue. Yet, what I found in the gallery was much more than what I had anticipated.

The exhibition contained an extensive range of works produced by Conceptualism and its associated movements, including many pieces not appearing in *The Last Art College*. It featured over thirty artists, beginning with Askevold through to Martha Wilson. While the presentation of Kennedy’s personal collection of artworks is interesting enough in and of itself, MacWilliam’s knowledgeable curation was invaluable in guiding the viewer through what was happening *between* the works. The exhibition brings together not only artworks produced by Kennedy and his colleagues, but letters, gifts, and personal ephemera that contextualize their working and personal relationships in an unprecedented and palpable way. For instance, the letters and postcards alone offer a tangible entry point for the viewer into the nexus of personalities that visited NSCAD at one time or another. Though reading handwritten script is familiar to us all, it humanizes the presentation, while contrasting with some of the more formal prints and paintings using hard-edged typography,

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Photo : Rachel Topham Photography

Garry Neill Kennedy
Q, from *Quid Pro Quo*, 2015.

Photo : courtesy of Griffin Art Projects, Vancouver

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Photo : Rachel Topham Photography



such as Kennedy's signature *Q* (from *Quid Pro Quo*) (2015), that dominates the gallery entryway with its fireworks-like display of fluorescent orange.

Language has always been an integral component of Conceptualism, and in the gallery, linguistic pathways also guided me from one work to the next, building a network of references and relationships that kept me circulating throughout the space. For example, Kennedy's habit of writing individuals' names on photographs in his *My Grade Four Class, Cote de Neiges School in Montreal, P.Q. 1946*, (1970) is echoed by June Leaf's naming of Kennedy's son and sculptor Dion Kliner in her 1987 oil painting, *Portrait of Dion and John*. While still another piece—a found colour chart of unknown origin—gives us a clue to Kennedy's creative process for several of his own works hanging nearby, while nodding to the two monochromes by Gerald Ferguson, *Maintenance Paintings* meant to be repainted by their owners if necessary. Here the proximity of their works acknowledges the close friendship these two artists shared.

By revealing the discursive nature of the artworks and objects on display, the exhibition not only gives visitors a chance to experience the works themselves, but invites the audience to construct their own narratives between the different pieces and their creators. Even though Conceptualism is often regarded by the uninitiated as cold or unapproachable, *Now Bulletin* makes evident the intertextual nature of this community of artists and their practices, while ultimately centering these dialogues around the unifying character of Kennedy himself.

Stéphane Bernard

Griffin Art Projects, Vancouver
September 19—December 12, 2020