ART CANADA INSTITUTE | INSTITUT DE L'ART CANADIEN

COURTING CONTROVERSY
10 CANADIAN ART PROVOCATIONS

Disrupting public expectations of art, these polarizing works sparked passionate debates among critics and everyday citizens across the country.

Art is a mirror of our world, which means that—like our surroundings—it is often unpalatable and shocking at first glance. Fifty-three years ago this week, on March 20, 1968, the London, Ontario artist Greg Curnoe (1936–1992) began installing his large-scale commission *Homage to the R 34* at the Montreal International Airport in Dorval, Quebec—a work that would become one of Canada's most famous cases of art censorship. Curnoe's piece featured explicit anti-war and anti-American subject matter that immediately sparked numerous complaints. It took only four days of discussion for the jury of art experts that had originally approved Curnoe's project to agree to its cancellation and order the work's removal from public view. The incident reminds us that even art that is now beloved in Canada, like Group of Seven artist J.E.H. MacDonald's *The Tangled Garden*, 1916 (see our entry on it below), took root in controversy. This week we're looking at some of the most contentious moments in Canadian art history and how they provoked lively and essential discussions about art's definition and role in society, and offered commentary about our country.

Sara Angel
Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

FIGURES IN A LANDSCAPE

by Bertram Brooker

Artistic depictions of the nude date back to antiquity, but when Toronto artist Bertram Brooker (1888–1955) unveiled *Figures in a Landscape* in a 1931 exhibition at the Art Gallery of Toronto (now the Art Gallery of Ontario) it was swiftly removed from view *before* the show's opening. Featuring two female nudes, whose torsos largely obstruct the view of the natural landscape in the background, the work was expunged from the exhibition by the city's board of education. Their concern? That *Figures in a Landscape* was inappropriate for gallery-going school children. Indignant, Brooker published the essay "Nudes and Prudes," in which he defended his painting's aesthetic merit and challenged the assumption that nudity in art has a corrupting effect on youth.

Learn more about this painting in the ACI book
Bertram Brooker: Life & Work by James King.

VOICE OF FIRE

by Barnett Newman

Barnett Newman,
Voice of Fire, 1967,
National Gallery of Canada

Robert Houle, *Muhnedobe uhyahyuk*
(*Where the gods are present*) (*Matthew*), 1989,
National Gallery of Canada

Outrage ensued in 1989 when the National Gallery of Canada paid $1.8 million for *Voice of Fire*, 1967, by the revered Colour Field painter Barnett Newman (1905–1970). Canadians were scandalized by the seeming simplicity of *Voice of Fire* and the fact that Newman was American. Yet the eighteen-foot-tall canvas, consisting of two ultramarine blue stripes separated by a central cadmium red stripe, belongs to one of the most significant events in Canadian history: Newman created it specifically to be suspended from the ceiling of Buckminster Fuller's iconic geodesic dome that served as the U.S. Pavilion at Expo 67 in Montreal. The gallery's purchase also acknowledged Newman's profound influence on Canadian artists, including Robert Houle, whose *Muhnedobe uhyahyuk* (*Where the gods are present*) (*Matthew*), 1989, drew inspiration from Newman's work.

Learn more about Robert Houle's work
and the influence of Barnett Newman in the ACI book
Robert Houle: Life & Work by Shirley Madill.

SPINNING CHANDELIER

by Rodney Graham

Created by the Abbotsford-born conceptual artist Rodney Graham (b.1949) and installed under Vancouver's Granville Street Bridge, *Spinning Chandelier*, 2019, continues to attract criticism for its extravagance in a city facing homelessness and affordable housing crises. As part of a municipal agreement granting Westbank Corporation permission to build four developments, *Spinning Chandelier*, a $4.8 million public art project, was funded by the luxury condo developer. The work is a monumental kinetic sculpture made of six hundred polyurethane "crystals," LED lights, and stainless steel. Three times a day, the epic 7,500-pound *Spinning Chandelier* descends and swirls for four minutes before returning to its original position. The work is an enlarged version of the revolving eighteenth-century light fixture featured in Graham's 35-mm-film installation *Torqued Chandelier Release*, 2005, which was inspired by Sir Isaac Newton's study of rotational motion.

Learn more about the artist and this work here.

VANITAS: FLESH DRESS FOR AN ALBINO ANORECTIC

by Jana Sterbak

Composed of fifty pounds of cured raw flank steak hand-sewn together, *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic*, 1987, by Czech-born Canadian artist Jana Sterbak (b.1955), caused a nation-wide uproar when it was featured in the 1991 exhibition *Jana Sterbak: States of Being* at the National Gallery of Canada. Created to intentionally decompose over time, this provocative and poignant reflection on vanity and mortality caused many Canadians to denounce the work as a flagrant waste of food—two hundred individuals mailed food scraps to the NGC in protest. The exhibition's curator, Diana Nemiroff, commented that people were upset "not because meat is food but because meat is flesh.... [*Vanitas*] reveals what we don't want to confront: our mortality."

Learn more about the artist here.

FLIGHT STOP

by Michael Snow

A combination of fibreglass forms and photographs of a single goose, *Flight Stop*, 1979, comments on the nature of photographic illusion. It is one of Toronto artist Michael Snow's (b.1928) most famous works, not only because it was created to be seen by thousands of people every day at Toronto's Eaton Centre, but also because it was the subject of a precedent-setting civil lawsuit. The sculptural installation consists of sixty flying geese breaking formation to land at the building's south entrance. Snow sued the Eaton Centre in 1982 after Christmas decorators tied ribbons around the necks of the geese and refused to remove them. He won the case on the basis that his moral rights had been violated, a victory that preceded the formal recognition of moral rights in the 1988 amendment to the Copyright Act of Canada.

Learn more about this work in the ACI book *Michael Snow: Life & Work* by Martha Langford.

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FOLDING SCREEN

by Liliane Karnouk

This multi-coloured folding screen by Vancouver-based Egyptian Canadian artist Liliane Karnouk (b.1944) was featured in *The Lands within Me: Expressions by Canadian Artists of Arab Origin*—an exhibition that came close to not opening. The meticulously machine-cut and hand-painted *Folding Screen*, 1997, was scheduled to be on view at the Canadian Museum of Civilization (now the Canadian Museum of History) as part of *The Lands within Me*, whose opening date was October 19, 2001. After the September 11 terrorist attacks against the United States, the museum decided to postpone the show indefinitely on the basis that "it lacked context." Protests ensued, led by members of the Muslim community along with the exhibition's artists. In response to mounting public pressure, the museum opened *The Lands within Me* as originally scheduled, although plans for it to tour the country were never realized.

Learn more about the artist and this work here.

THE TANGLED GARDEN

by J.E.H. MacDonald

In 1916, four years before co-founding the Group of Seven, J.E.H. MacDonald (1873–1932) painted *The Tangled Garden*. When it was shown that year at the Ontario Society of Artists' Exhibition, the painting was widely panned by critics, including one who accused MacDonald of throwing "his paint pots in the face of the public." Another described *The Tangled Garden* as "a huge tomato salad." To create the large canvas, MacDonald employed expressive brushstrokes and a rich colour palette—a style that Canadians were little accustomed to—to record the abundant variety of plants growing in his garden in late summer. Today, *The Tangled Garden* represents a milestone in the development of the Group of Seven and it is one of MacDonald's most famed paintings.

MURAL FOR THE INDIANS OF CANADA PAVILION AT EXPO 67

by Norval Morrisseau

One of nine Indigenous artists commissioned to create works for the Indians of Canada Pavilion at Expo 67 in Montreal, the Anishinaabe painter Norval Morrisseau (1931–2007) designed an exterior mural of Mother Earth nursing two bear cubs—an image that organizers deemed as inappropriate due to being too explicit. Refusing to sacrifice his vision to appease the tastes of non-Indigenous audiences, Morrisseau abandoned the project and fellow artist and friend Carl Ray (1943–1979) was left to modify and complete the mural. Despite the tensions that arose during the organization of the pavilion, it provided an unprecedented opportunity for the featured artists to raise public awareness of Indigenous issues and activism. A founding figure of contemporary Indigenous art, Morrisseau developed an entirely new style of painting inspired by his culture.

Learn more about Norval Morrisseau and Expo 67 in the ACI book *Norval Morrisseau: Life & Work* by Carmen Robertson.

HOMAGE TO THE R 34

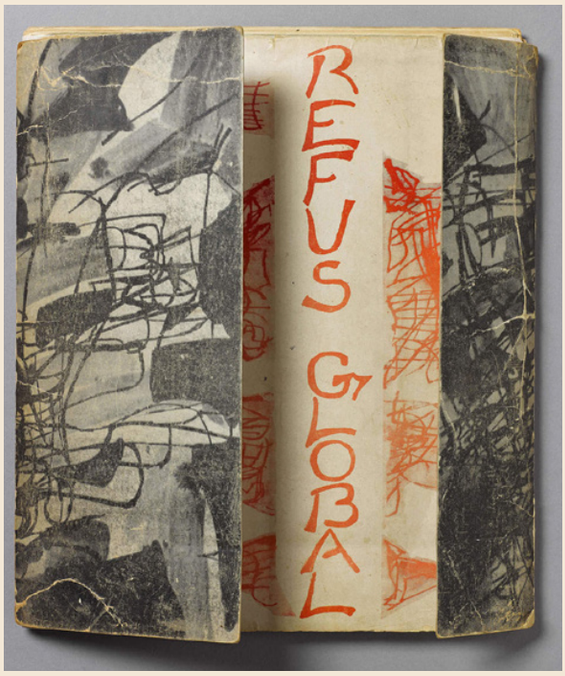
by Greg Curnoe

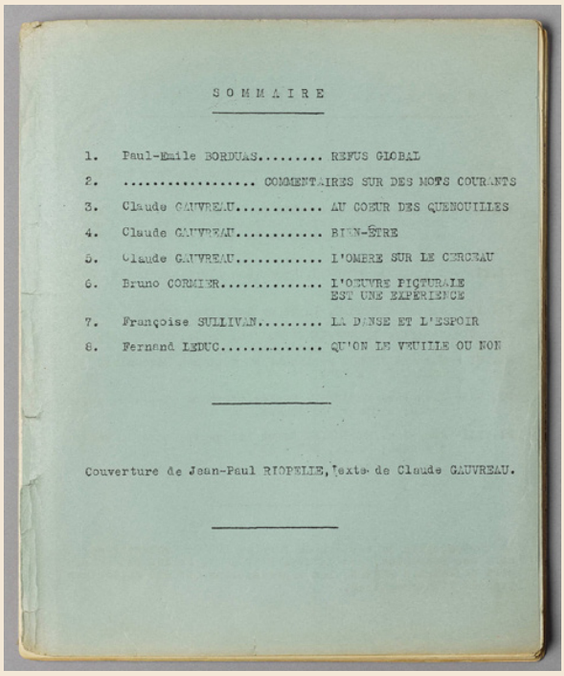
London artist Greg Curnoe's *Homage to the R 34*, October 1967–March 1968, a commission comprised of twenty-six panels for the Montreal International Airport in Dorval, Quebec, is one of the most significant examples of art censorship in Canada. The installation was removed from its location following complaints from the RCMP and airport personnel, who noted the work's anti-war sentiments, including text references to the draft-dodger Muhammad Ali and a falling figure who resembles American President Lyndon B. Johnson. Curnoe was known for his brightly coloured art works that often included political provocations. Today, the famed *Homage to the R 34* is in storage at the National Gallery of Canada, which acquired it in 1998.

Learn more about this work in the ACI book *Greg Curnoe: Life & Work* by Judith Rodger.

REFUS GLOBAL

by Paul-Émile Borduas and the Automatistes





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Couverture de Jean-Paul RIOPELLE, texte de Claude GAUVREAU.

The most incendiary cultural and political manifesto in Canadian history, *Refus global* was published by the Montreal artists' group the Automatistes on August 9, 1948. In the document, which was primarily written by the abstract painter Paul-Émile Borduas (1905–1960), the Automatistes articulated their vision of an anarchist social order, attacking the parochialism of the provincial government and the political influence of the Catholic church. While Borduas immediately lost his teaching position and left Quebec soon afterwards, *Refus global* had a lasting impact on politics in Quebec and anticipated the Quiet Revolution in the 1960s. It became the foundation for other members of the Automatistes to continue their political activism.

Learn more about Paul-Émile Borduas, the Automatistes, and *Refus global* in the ACI book *Paul-Émile Borduas: Life & Work* by François-Marc Gagnon.

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Image Credits: **[1,6]** Bertram Brooker, *Figures in a Landscape*, 1931, oil on canvas, 60.9 x 76.2 cm. Unlocated. Courtesy of the Estate of Bertram Brooker. **[2,17]** *Refus global* manifesto cover. **[3,11]** Jana Sterbak, *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic*, 1987, 23 kilos of salt-cured raw flank steak, sewing thread, salt, metal and model, variable dimensions. Collection of the Centre Pompidou, Paris. © Jana Sterbak. Photo: Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI. **[4,15]** Expo 67 Mural. Courtesy of Kinsman Robinson Gallery. **[5,12]** Michael Snow, *Flight Stop*, 1979, 60 suspended fibreglass Canada goose forms surfaced with tinted black and white photographs, 32 x 20 x 16 m. Toronto Eaton Centre. Cadillac Fairview Corporation Limited. © Michael Snow. **[7]** Barnett Newman, *Voice of Fire*, 1967, acrylic on canvas, 543.6 x 243.8 cm. Collection of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. © The Barnett Newman Foundation, New York / SODRAC (2016). **[8]** Robert Houle, *Muhnedobe uhyahyuk* (*Where the gods are present*) (*Matthew*), 1989, oil on canvas, one of four paintings, each 244 x 182.4 x 5 cm. Collection of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, purchased 1992 (36168.1-4). Courtesy of the artist. © Robert Houle. **[9,10]** Rodney Graham, *Spinning Chandelier*, 2014, crystal, 14 x 25.5 ft, Granville Street Bridge, Vancouver. Courtesy of Westbank. **[13]** Liliane Karnouk, *Folding Screen*, 1997, acrylic on fiberboard. Photo: Harry Foster © Canadian Museum of Civilization Corporation. **[14]** J.E.H. MacDonald, *The Tangled Garden*, 1916, oil on beaverboard, 121.4 x 152.4 cm. Collection of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Gift of W.M. Southam, F.N. Southam, and H.S. Southam, 1937, in memory of their brother Richard Southam. **[16]** Greg Curnoe, *Homage to the R 34* [the Dorval mural], October 1967–March 1968, Bostik urethane enamel paint on plywood and steel, propellers, metal screens, and electric motors, 26 panels of irregular dimensions installed in three units: 295 x 1551 x 25.5 cm; 195 x 1109.9 x 25.5 cm; 191.5 x 492.7 x 2.5 cm (overall length 32.2 m). Commissioned by the Department of Transport, Ottawa, for the Montreal International Airport, Dorval, Quebec; collection of National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, transfer from Transport Canada, 1998 (no. 39705.1-26). © Estate of Greg Curnoe/SODRAC (2016). **[18]** *Refus global* manifesto table of contents.