ART CANADA INSTITUTE | INSTITUT DE L'ART CANADIEN

SEPTEMBER 9, 2022

# 12 ART ARGUMENTS, CONTROVERSIES & DISPUTES

*The last century of Canadian art has seen many altercations. With the recent outcry over Ken Lum's* The Buffalo and the Buffalo Fur Trader *(below), a new type of dispute comes to the fore.*

Canadian artist Ken Lum's public commission *The Buffalo and the Buffalo Fur Trader*, 2016, has been sitting in outdoor storage in Edmonton since its completion.

In 1931, Bertram Brooker's *Figures in a Landscape* was removed from public view when its subject matter was deemed too salacious for institutional walls. Since then—as shown below—Canadians have taken offence at art that has been too politically incendiary, too expensive, too morally questionable, and too simplistic. Now though, we have the first public argument over art that *could* be misinterpreted and be understood in a manner completely unintended by the artist. Twelve years ago, Vancouver-born, Philadelphia-based Ken Lum was commissioned to create a two-part bronze sculpture for an Edmonton bridge—comprised of a colonial fur trader and a bison, dual figures that would be situated on either end of the crossing, both looking out at the water. The artist wanted travellers "to experience the palpable tension and problematic history" between them, a reference to colonial decimation of the animal hunted to near extinction. Although Lum received support from Indigenous communities before starting the work, last month Edmonton officials decided it would never go on view. The city received not even one complaint about the work, however, they made a pre-emptive move to never show it. Their concern: might the art affirm colonialism?

The timing of the event coincides with the *Wall Street Journal* opinion piece on how when it comes to cultural institutions, woke ideologies may undermine the very teachings we need most. Since time immemorial art has always been the subject of misunderstanding. In light of this, Edmonton officials might have considered placing a didactic panel beside the sculpture to unpack its meaning. With such a step we might now have a relevant work of art on view. Instead, The Buffalo Affair will become an example of a costly commission relegated to storage—though surely one that, like the other pieces below, will move important conversations about art forward with the passage of time.

**Sara Angel**
Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

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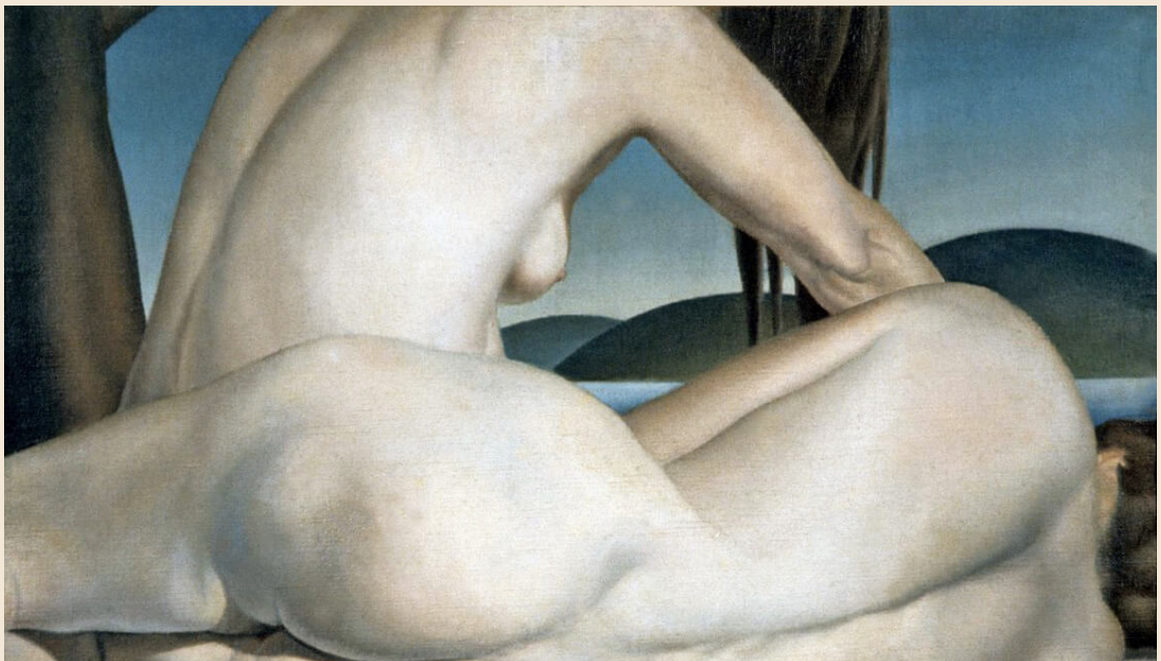
## 1931

# FIGURES IN A LANDSCAPE

*by Bertram Brooker*



Bertram Brooker, *Figures in a Landscape*, 1931, Courtesy of the Estate of 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. The work featuring two female nudes 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, challenged the assumption that nudity in art has a corrupting effect on youth, and considerably advanced the conversation about the role of art.

Read more in ACI's
*Bertram Brooker: Life & Work* by James King

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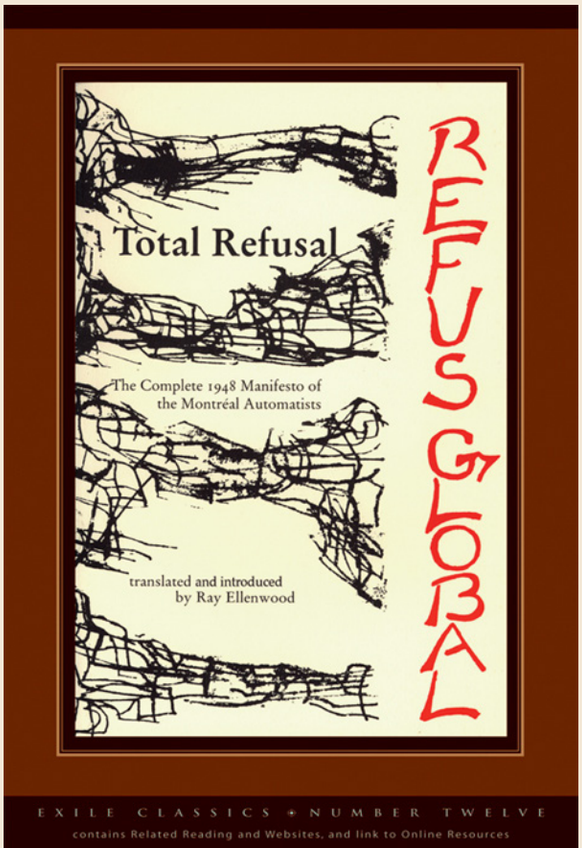
## 1948

# REFUS GLOBAL

*by the Automatistes*



Cover of Paul-Émile Borduas, *Refus global: et autres écrits* (Typo, 1991).

Cover of Paul-Émile Borduas, *Total Refusal*, trans. Ray Ellenwood (Exile Editions, 2012).

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. Primarily written by the abstract painter Paul-Émile Borduas (1905–1960), he and the Automatistes attacked the political influence of the Catholic Church and the parochialism of the provincial government. Borduas immediately lost his teaching position and left Quebec soon afterwards. However, *Refus global* would go on to have a lasting impact on Quebec politics and anticipated the Quiet Revolution in the 1960s. It also became the foundation for other members of the Automatistes to continue their political activism.

Read more in ACI's
*Paul-Émile Borduas: Life & Work* by François-Marc Gagnon

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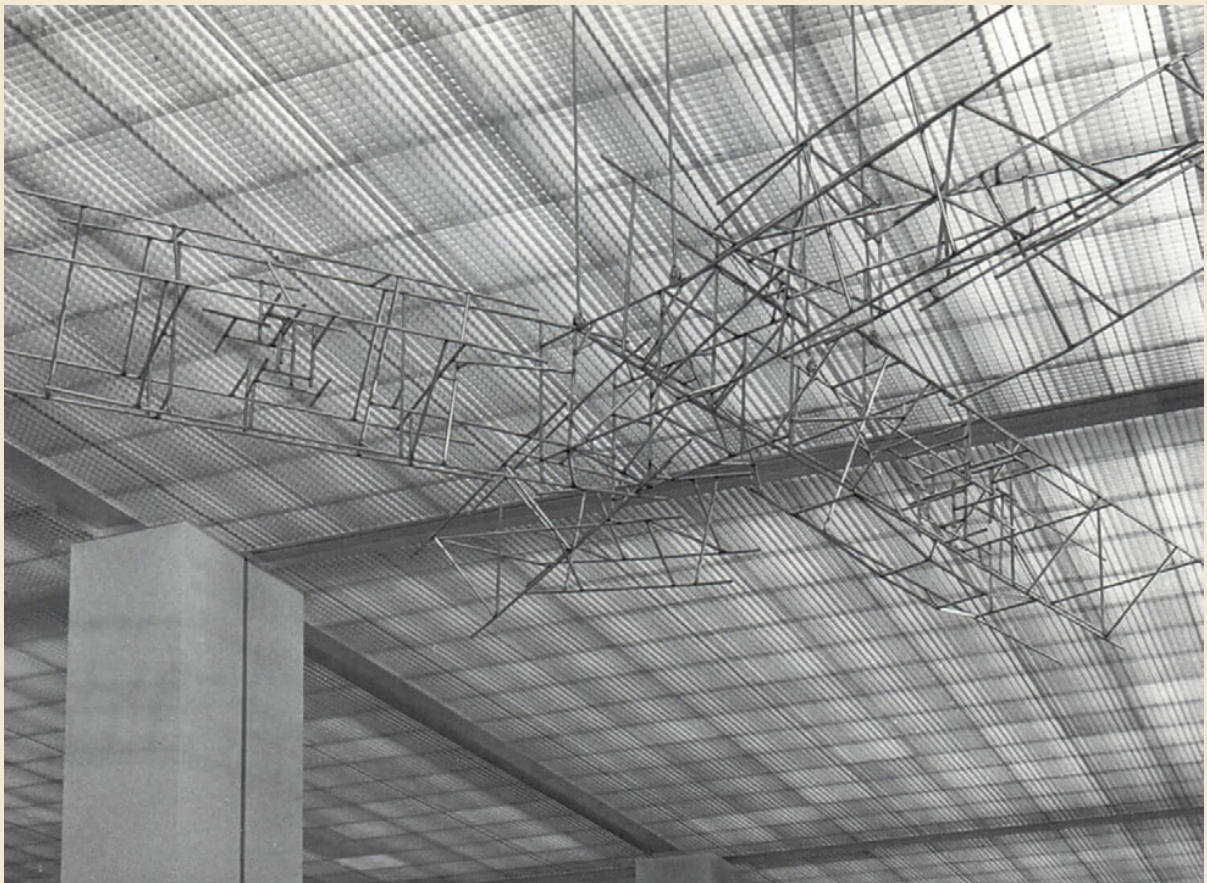
## 1964

# GALAXIES

*by Kazuo Nakamura*



Kazuo Nakamura, *Galaxies*, 1964, Toronto Pearson International Airport.

After the Toronto International Airport (now Toronto Pearson International Airport) commissioned Japanese Canadian artist Kazuo Nakamura (1926–2002) to create *Galaxies*, 1964, local newspapers incited a public outcry over the amount of taxpayer money being spent on its construction and purchase. The installation, made up of two open metal structures that resembled the pioneering Wright Flyer flown by Orville and Wilbur Wright in 1903, prompted such angry headlines as "Airport Art Will Cost $150,000" (*Globe and Mail*) and "Now YOU Are Canada's Biggest Art Patron" (*Toronto Daily Star*). Despite the protests, Nakamura's vision was realized—a sculpture that was much larger than any he had ever built before.

Read more in ACI's
*Kazuo Nakamura: Life & Work* by John G. Hatch

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## 1967

# MURAL FOR THE INDIANS OF CANADA PAVILION AT EXPO 67

*by Norval Morrisseau*

Norval Morrisseau's mural for the Indians of Canada Pavilion at Expo 67.

The Anishinaabe painter Norval Morrisseau (1931–2007) was one of nine Indigenous artists commissioned to create works for the Indians of Canada Pavilion at Expo 67 in Montreal. But the Expo's organizers deemed his design of an exterior mural of Mother Earth nursing two bear cubs as inappropriate and 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.

Read more about Norval Morrisseau and Expo 67
in ACI's *Norval Morrisseau: Life & Work* by Carmen Robertson

1968

# HOMAGE TO THE R 34

*by Greg Curnoe*

Greg Curnoe, *Homage to the R 34* [the Dorval mural], October 1967–March 1968, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

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. Today, the famed *Homage to the R 34* is in storage at the National Gallery of Canada, which acquired it in 1998. Curnoe remains revered for his brightly coloured artworks that often included political provocations.

Read more in ACI's
*Greg Curnoe: Life & Work* by Judith Rodger

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1982

# FLIGHT STOP

*by Michael Snow*

Michael Snow, *Flight Stop*, 1979, Toronto Eaton Centre.

A combination of fibreglass forms and photographs of a single goose, *Flight Stop*, 1979, 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.

Read more in ACI's
*Michael Snow: Life & Work* by Martha Langford

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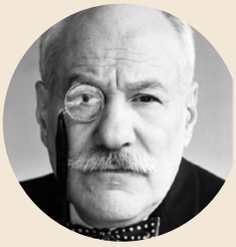
## 1989

# VOICE OF FIRE

*by Barnett Newman*

Barnett Newman, *Voice of Fire*, 1967, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.



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 (b.1947), whose *Muhnedobe uhyahyuk* (*Where the gods are present*) (*Matthew*), 1989, drew inspiration from Newman's work.

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

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## 1991

# VANITAS: FLESH DRESS FOR AN ALBINO ANORECTIC

*by Jana Sterbak*

Jana Sterbak, *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic*, 1987, Centre Pompidou, Paris.

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 (NGC). Created to intentionally decompose over time, this provocative and poignant reflection on mortality and the Dutch tradition of still life painting caused many Canadians to denounce the work as a flagrant waste of food. In protest, two hundred individuals mailed food scraps to Ottawa's NGC. 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 Jana Sterbak

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## 2001

# ...AND AT NIGHT WE LEAVE OUR DREAMS ON WINDOW SILL, MEMORY OF A PLACE

*by Farouk Kaspaules*

Farouk Kaspaules, Installation of *...and at night we leave our dreams on window sill, memory of a place*, 2000, Ottawa Art Gallery.

This mixed-media piece by Baghdad-born Iraqi Canadian artist Farouk Kaspaules (b.1950) came close to not being shown. It was scheduled to be part of the 2001 exhibition *The Lands within Me: Expressions by Canadian Artists of Arab Origin* at the Canadian Museum of Civilization (now the Canadian Museum of History), which almost did not open after the September 11 terrorist attacks against the United States. The museum decided to postpone indefinitely *The Lands*

*within Me* on the basis that "it lacked context." Did Kaspaules's composition, which features images of ancient monuments, figures, and relics overlaid with abstracted representations of stealth bombers, pose a threat? Not according to protestors along with the exhibition's artists. In response to mounting pressure from the public and the federal government, the museum opened *The Lands within Me* as originally scheduled, although plans for it to tour the country were never realized.

Read more in ACI's
*Ottawa Art & Artists: An Illustrated History* by Jim Burant

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## 2016

# A SMALL MATTER OF ENGINEERING, PART II

*by Kara Springer*

Kara Springer, *A Small Matter of Engineering, Part II*, 2016, Courtesy of Kara Springer.

In September of 2016—mere months before Donald Trump was elected president of the United States—Canadian artist Kara Springer (b.1980), who is of Jamaican and Bajan descent, was at New York City's New Museum when she overheard a phrase that she could not shake: "White people. Do something." Weeks later, Springer erected a public sculpture in the courtyard of the Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia, where she was pursuing her MFA, enshrining the public utterance into something more permanent. The work ignited heated exchanges online, and prompted the university to post security guards to oversee its protection amidst demands that it be taken down. In light of these challenges, the urgency of Springer's piece prevails, while the "small matter" of a major call to action continues to resonate.

Learn more about Kara Springer

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## 2019

# SPINNING CHANDELIER

*by Rodney Graham*

Rodney Graham, *Spinning Chandelier*, 2019, Granville Street Bridge, Vancouver.

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 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. Despite outrage against the 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.

Learn more about Rodney Graham

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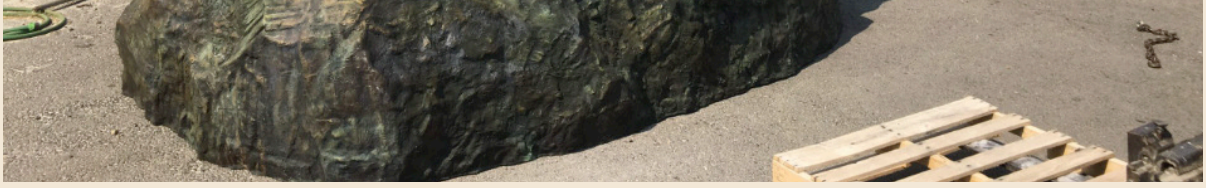
## 2022

# THE BUFFALO AND THE BUFFALO FUR TRADER

*by Ken Lum*



Ken Lum, *The Buffalo and the Buffalo Fur Trader*, 2016, commissioned by the City of Edmonton.

"Thought-provoking" or "monumentally inappropriate"? Both phrases have been used to describe the public sculpture by renowned Vancouver-born Chinese Canadian artist Ken Lum (b.1956) that was deaccessioned last week by the City of Edmonton, who commissioned the piece twelve years ago. Based on a photograph from 1878, the bronze work features two components—a settler fur trader sitting atop a pile of hides and a freestanding bison—that were designed to be placed on either side of the Walterdale Bridge above the North Saskatchewan River. Lum, known for his social justice-minded public projects, created the sculpture to provoke dialogue between the ecologically extinct animal and the figure who violently exploited it. Despite his consultation with Indigenous groups before realizing the work, six years after its completion the City of Edmonton has now raised concerns that *The Buffalo and the Buffalo Fur Trader*, 2016, might be interpreted as a celebration of colonialism. The controversy surrounding the commission has become a matter of international interest.

Learn more about Ken Lum

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**Image Credits: [1, 15]** Ken Lum, *The Buffalo and the Buffalo Fur Trader*, 2016, bronze, commissioned by the City of Edmonton. Courtesy of Ken Lum. **[2]** Bertram Brooker, *Figures in a Landscape*, 1931, oil on canvas, 60.9 x 76.2 cm. Unlocated. Courtesy of the Estate of Bertram Brooker. **[3]** Cover of Paul-Émile Borduas, *Refus global: et autres écrits* (Typo, 1991). **[4]** Cover of Paul-Émile Borduas, *Total Refusal/Classics Series*, trans. Ray Ellenwood (Exile Editions, 2012). **[5]** Kazuo Nakamura, *Galaxies*, 1964, stainless Steel, 305 x 305 x 305 cm, Toronto Pearson International Airport. Collection of the Greater Toronto Airports Authority. **[6]** 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). **[7]** 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. **[8]** Norval Morrisseau's mural for the Indians of Canada Pavilion at Expo 67. Courtesy of Kinsman Robinson Gallery. **[9]** 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). **[10]** 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. **[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. **[12]** Rodney Graham, *Spinning Chandelier*, 2019, crystal, 14 x 25.5 ft, Granville Street Bridge, Vancouver. Courtesy of Westbank. **[13]** Farouk Kaspaules, *...and at night we leave our dreams on window sill*, 2000, serigraph and mixed media on BFK Rives paper, 640.1 x 365.8 x 5.1 cm. Collection of the Ottawa Art Gallery, Gift of the artist, 2020 (2020.02.05a-u). Courtesy of the Ottawa Art Gallery. © Farouk Kaspaules/Copyright Visual Arts-CARCC, 2022. Photo credit: Justin Wonnacott. **[14]** Kara Springer, *A Small Matter of Engineering, Part II*, 2016. Courtesy of Kara Springer. Photo credit: Conrad Benner.