

# Conceptualism with a human face

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**IN PERSON** / *Garry Neill Kennedy is the grand old man of Canadian conceptualism. But as a current Toronto exhibition shows, his intellect is tempered by plentiful good humour and old-fashioned artistic intuition.*

TO his supporters, he's a grand master of conceptual art and one of the seminal figures in Canadian contemporary art. To his detractors, Garry Neill Kennedy, 63, is an anti-art hooligan, an esthetic nihilist, the wicked begetter of visual one-liners. To his fans, he was the brilliant wild-card administrator who, becoming president of Halifax's Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in 1967 at the age of 32, put the once sleepy little institution prominently on the international art map. To his foes, he was an elusive and indeed anarchic loose-cannon educator.

But admiration seems set to win out over opposition. Since leaving behind the NSCAD presidency in 1990 to concentrate on teaching and making art at the college, he has been busy confirming his status as a potent analyst and deconstructor of cultural conventions.

As Martin Barlosky remarked in his cogent catalogue essay for Kennedy's major 1995 retrospective, the artist has invariably demonstrated "a persistent sensitivity to the ambiguities of the ordinary." His work, writes Barlosky, investigates "culturally constructed artifacts whose meanings have been prematurely foreclosed." Kennedy himself, whose sense of fun is as intense as his embrace of the polemical, tends to put it more simply. "My work follows a clear critical path," the artist explains, his eyes glinting with mischief, his furry eyebrows raised in spurious innocence. "I just say to myself 'Hey, what's going on? What's this place about?'"

Kennedy's new solo exhibition at Toronto's Cold City Gallery, for example, is called *Suit*. But where's the garment? What you see, when you walk into the gallery is five bright white walls bearing eccentrically positioned squares of bright yellow paint, in various sizes. At the back of the gallery, however, there is a Vogue men's suit pattern, size 42, mounted on the wall, covered with Kennedy's annotations and measurements. Five different sections of the suit pattern, it turns out, have given rise to the size and placement of the yellow squares.

EACH wall is one of these suit-plan sections," Kennedy explains — each a part of the suit pattern, *very* highly abstracted. Why yellow? "I like using yellow and white," replies Kennedy gormlessly. "And it's the same yellow as a couple of yellow tiles in the gallery floor." Oh yeah, didn't notice that. "Conceptual art is very spontaneous, you know," Kennedy adds. "And intuitive." The work suddenly gets more edgy when you notice, finally, that Kennedy has printed, as a modest catalogue for the show, a list of numbered suit-pattern parts, to each of which has been assigned the name, salary and stock-option value of Canadian company presidents and CEOs ("suits"), arranged in descend-

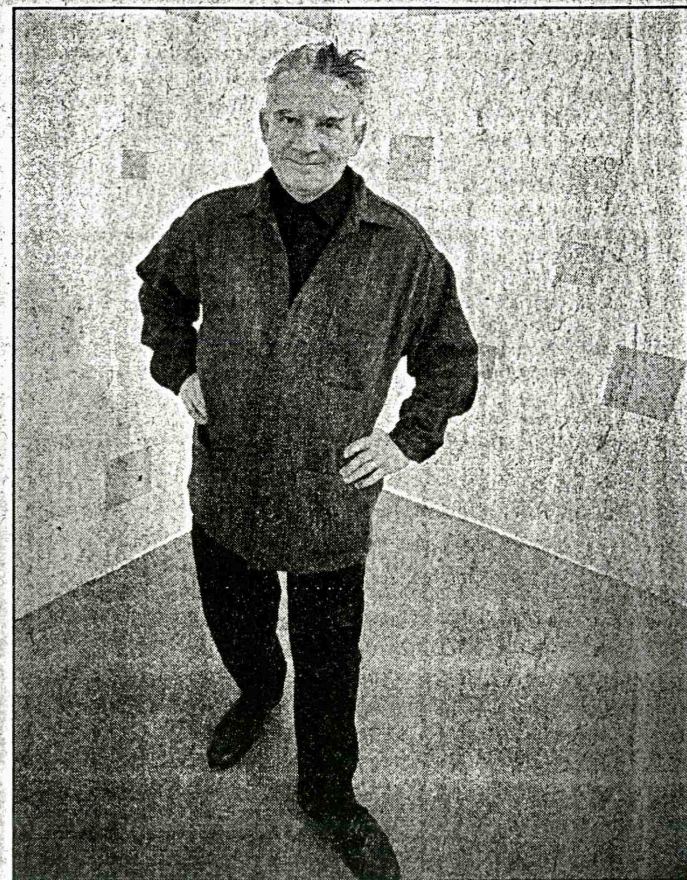
ing order of income — from Laurent Beaudoin of Bombardier Inc. ("annual salary \$19,100,317") to Peter Munk of TrizecHahn Corp. ("annual salary \$1,722,550"). "I got the salary figures from The Globe and Mail's Report on Business," says Kennedy, smiling happily at the irony of radical artist mining conservative vein (and not always getting his accounting just right, we must add). Is there any connection between men, salaries and parts? Any reason why James Bryan of Gulf Canada Resources Inc. ("annual salary \$1,768,853") is assigned the suit's crotch shield, while Charles Childers of Potash Corp. of Saskatchewan ("annual salary \$7,729,256") is given the inside pocket? Nope, there isn't. The suit parts are listed and the salaries are listed and that's how they came together. The offhandedness, so typical of the artist, is corrosive. Like all of Kennedy's work over the past 25 years, you come to its meanings gradually, first dealing with the sensuality of what he does and then pondering its deeper and sometimes dangerous significance.

Kennedy's fecund reign at NSCAD has, at this historical distance, the same flavour of apparent insouciance masking a larger and deeper project. He was teaching at Northland College in Wisconsin in 1967 when he was invited to head up what was

then the Nova Scotia College of Art. Kennedy says he admired both the little 80-year-old college's tenacity and its austere maritime environment (in tow behind a ship-builder father, Kennedy spent part of an itinerant childhood in Nova Scotia) and regarded his new role as marking up "a blank slate."

Before you could say "avant garde," Kennedy had recruited some splendid help in the guise of teachers like painter and performance artist Gerald Ferguson; Kennedy's mercurial colleague at arms. Together they began to create their dream of an art college on the cutting edge of contemporary creation. To that end, Kennedy set up a visiting-artists program ("unheard of before this") that brought in art heavyweights like Claes Oldenburg, Richard Serra, Joseph Beuys, Carl André, Robert Morris, Dan Graham, Robert Smithson, Daniel Buren, Robert Irwin and Sol LeWitt. They made prints at the college's new lithography workshop; they produced books for the new NSCAD Press. "We dared," Kennedy has recently written for a memoir of the period, "to make our concerns synonymous with the most pressing issues in art and design."

Kennedy has always been fond of a print made at NSCAD by John Baldessari, featuring the American artist's scrawled admonition to himself,



Garry Neill Kennedy at Cold City Gallery, with his installation titled *Suit*.  
(TIBOR KOLLEY/The Globe and Mail)

"I will not make any more boring art." Kennedy's memoir notes that it had similarly been his intention from the beginning "not to make any more boring art colleges." And so he hasn't.

And he hasn't, for that matter, made any boring art either.

*Garry Neill Kennedy's Suit continues at Cold City Gallery, 636 Richmond St. W., Toronto, until Feb. 7.*