Hi! Please show it around the family. Thanx Barry

Simple Functionalism: A theory, a gallery, a desk

Simple Functionalism, an installation by Gary Neill Kennedy, the first part of Vocation/Vacation: Three Installations for Banff, on view at the Walter Phillips Gallery, Banff Centre, until Nov. 15.

VISUAL ARTS



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Three internationally known artists — Gary Kennedy, Hans Haacke and Michael Asher — have been invited to produce site-specific works of art at the Walter Phillips Gallery as part of Vocation/Vacation, a project initiated by curator Brian MacNevin.

Beginning with the premise that an artist's work is affected by the environment in which it is produced, MacNevin asked each of the artists to make a work about Banff. A further consideration of the exhibition is the fact that the cultural context in which a work is created and the location in which it is seen are equally important factors in an audience's understanding and interpretation of the artist's concept.

In producing their works, Kennedy, Haacke and Asher were asked to consider all aspects of the Banff Centre School of Fine Arts, the town of Banff and the federally-operated national park within which the school and the town are located.

Consider scenery

They were asked also to consider the beautiful mountain scenery that attracts thousands of winter and summer visitors to the locale. As the project outline states: "The village of Banff with its transient population is surrounded by a mountain barrier and could be seen to be cut off from the dynamics of culture *or* protected from outside activities."

Each of the three artists has visited Banff and the Phillips Gallery to explore the site. And because their trips were necessarily brief, a 203-page manuscript, Banff Information Base, was researched and prepared for them by Canadian artists Jan Pottie and Tom Sherman as an aid to their individual research. Pottie and Sherman did their Banff research for two weeks last spring after travelling to Alberta by train.

Kennedy's is first

Of the three separate installations "to be set in position," Gary Kennedy's is the first.

Some visitors to Kennedy's installation have hesitated to enter what appears to be an empty gallery. Only a desk, the same one that gallery attendants have used since the Phillips opened, occupies the space. But the ordinary piece of office furniture, seen in its usual place, has been altered. It is the installation.

Among the materials compiled by Pottie and Sherman, Kennedy focused on the Banff Centre Esthetics Committee's in-house Statement of Design Guidelines, amended and approved in December 1980 by the policy and planning office. In particular, Kennedy's attention was drawn to a guideline (Page three, point four) dealing with fabric and furniture:

Good design basis

"The campus must initiate a general policy of avoiding the use of simulated materials wherever possible. Plastic laminates come in an attractive range of pure colors, which are not pretending to be anything else. Honesty in the use of materials is the basis of good design."

On his preparatory visit to Banff, Kennedy had noticed that the Phillips Gallery desk did not comply with the guidelines on furniture. Its top was covered with an artificial wood-grain laminate, the sides with wood veneer and the legs with a wood stain.

To bring the object into line with the Centre's esthetic policy, Kennedy engaged a Canmore woodworker, Malcolm Braithwaite, to resurface the desk with a pure color plastic laminate. A section of the original surface on one side of the desk was left exposed to show the original physical conditions of the object.

Remains functional

The desk remains functional and in fact is to be used by gallery attendants during the period of the installation just as it has been used in past exhibitions. On top of the desk is a basket containing a stack of four-page handouts: a cover-sheet describing the basic structure of Simple Functionalism with the Banff Centre Esthetics Committee design guidelines attached.

The guidelines themselves thus become an integral part of the work, its specific context as well as the source of its motivation. And because the guidelines comment on everything from wall paint and carpets, cutlery and bedspreads to campus architecture, the use of natural materials, plants and disguised parking lots, the work directs the viewer's attention outside of the gallery onto the entire interior and exterior environment of the Centre.

Guidelines laudatory

On one level, the quasi-Bauhausian guidelines are laudatory in the ideal they embody of a consistently developed homogeneous environment in harmony with its natural surroundings. On another, bureaucratic control exercised (at least in theory) on the smallest details of an environment planned for and inhabited by artists for the purpose of creative endeavor is ironic.

While the idea of esthetics ruled by committee is ironic enough, in this context a desk altered to meet an esthetics committee's guidelines and then presented like an esthetic object in an art gallery becomes doubly so. Kennedy, who is president of the progressive Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, housed in a group of renovated historic buildings in Halifax, could hardly have overlooked it.

It's also ironic that an artist has chosen to remake the reality of the Centre's environment (represented by the unaltered desk) to conform with its stated ideals. By so doing, he points out the gap (or time lag) between theory and practice, implying that it might exist in yet another context in the educational system as well. For another time lag is apparent here. The Bauhaus theories, mixed with others in the guidelines, have fallen before the new ideas of post-modernism: They are considered not only to be old hat but also a reason for the sterile urban environments we inhabit.

(Many of the Banff Centre program participants live in their mountain retreat like students in new universities — in the kind of bare low-rise apartment buildings that can be found in any urban sprawl.)

As most of Kennedy's provocative work does, Simple Functionalism contains many multi-levelled ironies. The title of the work comes from a guideline statement on maintenance: "In fact, simple functionalism and economy in maintenance are basic principles of selection and of overall design planning." As in so many aspects of modern day life, the bottom esthetic line is practicality and cost.

The altered desk has a much more solid and substantial presence as an object than it did in its original state, perhaps proving the point about "honesty in the use of materials." But the altered desk also becomes an abstraction in that it represents an idea and an ideal.

At the same time, it makes references to minimal art, the work of artists like Scott Burton who make non-functional furniture as formal art objects, and to the piece by Michael Asher which will also alter a physical aspect of the Phillips Gallery.

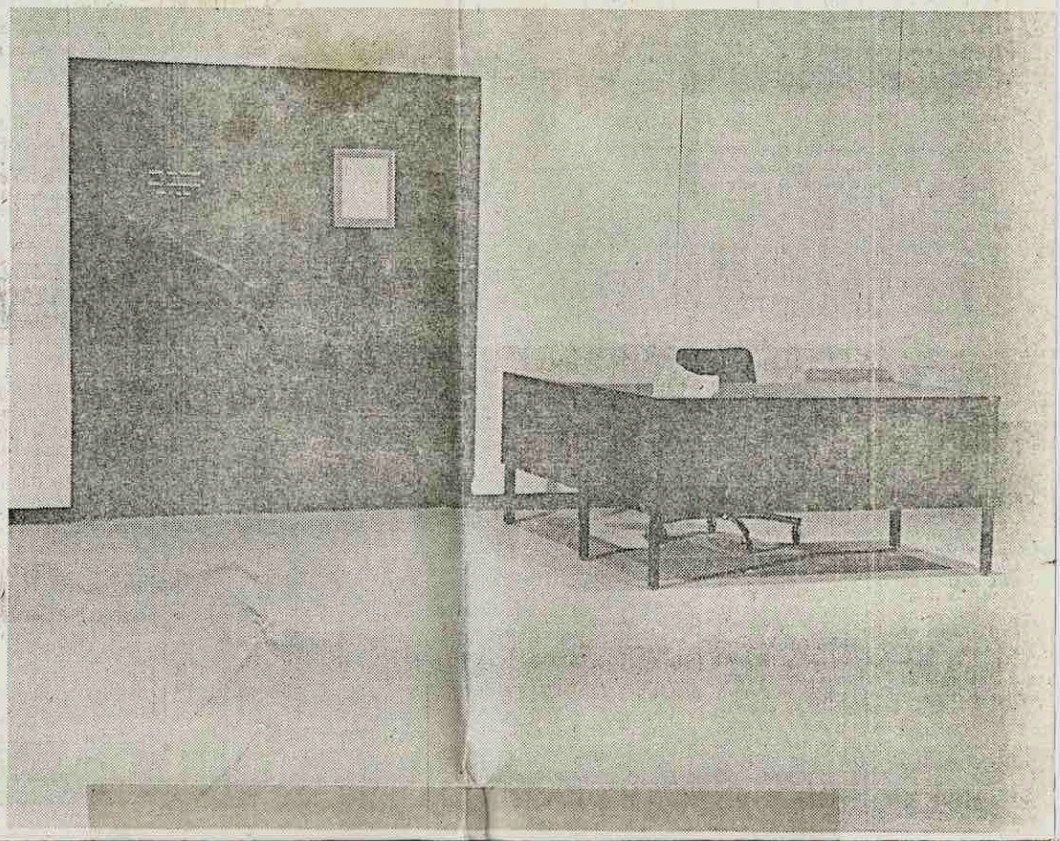
And basic to the piece is the larger issue of art-making engaged with broad social and cultural concerns as opposed to the manufacture of precious art objects that refer back only to themselves or to other art.

Kennedy, who has produced conceptually-oriented paintings and drawings, is one who has rejected object-making. Because of this and the need for specialized skills, he hired a craftsman to alter the desk. The piece also develops a conceptual resonance of its own.

Kennedy pointed out in an interview that the designer color of the laminate he chose from samples turned out to be Angola Brown, a name with definite racist overtones that he only learned later on. So the physical alteration of the desk, directed from distance, took on additional and larger socio/political connotations.

A very successful piece, Simple Functionalism is not simple at all. Like a stone thrown into a pond, the reverberating ideas it generates are concentric, reaching further and further from Banff-into the world outside.

Hans Haacke's installation can be seen from Nov. 19-29. Michael Asher's will be on view from Dec. 3-13. Both artists will install their works and make visiting artists presentations to Banff Centre participants. Their presentations are open to the public.



Simple Functionalism, an installation by Gary Kennedy — office furniture esthetics