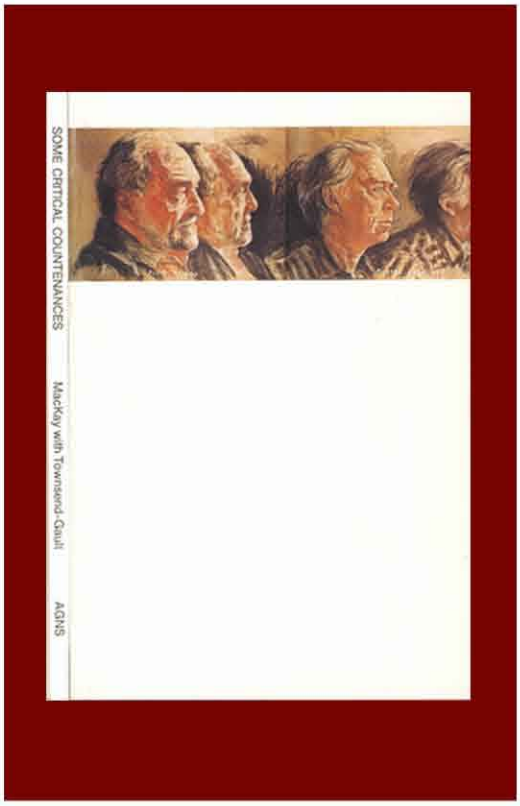
SOME CRITICAL COUNTENANCES
AN EXTENDED DRAWING

ESSAY / **CHARLOTTE TOWNSEND-GAULT**



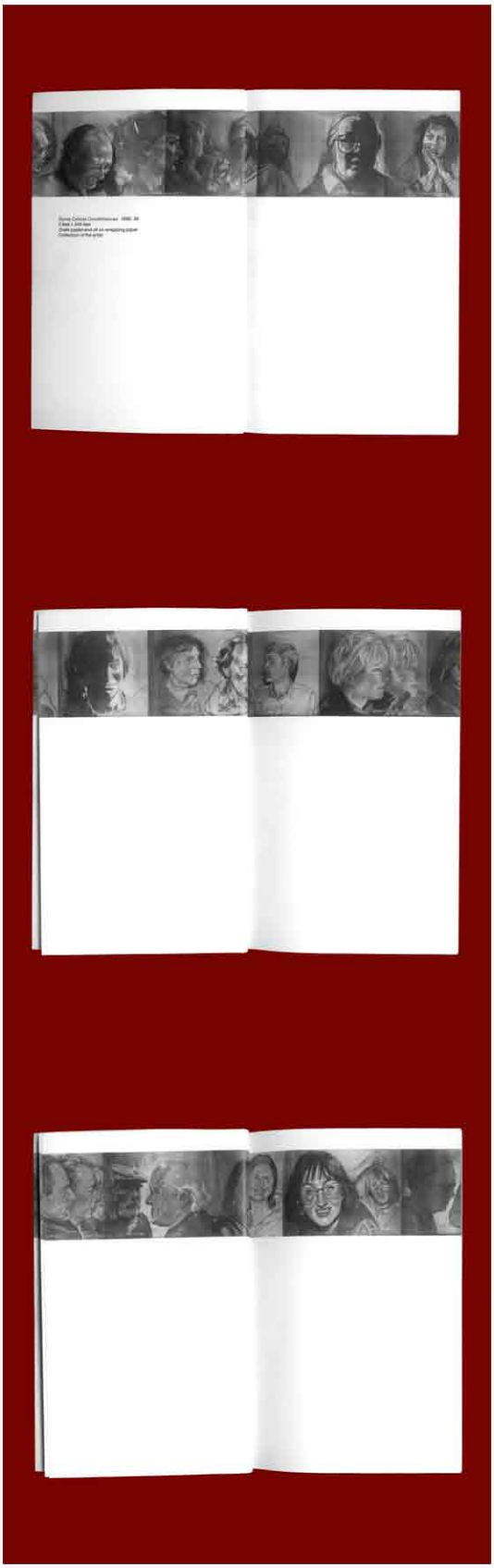
The specifications inspire awe - 545 running feet of paper, on three continuous rolls, 5 feet high, on which the facial likenesses of many people (the artist lost track of exactly how many), some in multiple versions, are rendered in a popular illustrative style in chalk pastel and oil, at the rate of about one a day. MacKay worked continuously, without deviating from this formula for almost two years. In a cramped studio, the paper could only be unrolled one section at a time, in the manner of an oriental scroll painting; the work has never been seen by the artist, or anyone else, in its entirety. It is intended to be seen in a large space with as much of it unrolled as is practicable.

Faces being the essential sources for understanding ourselves and others, this work would be of some interest if nothing more were known about it. But these facts of its making, the methodology of *Some Critical Countenances*, are related in a crucial way to its central fact The individuals portrayed were chosen not for how they look, which i,, not significantly different from any other group of reasonably well-fed human beings, but for who they are. These are the faces of the Canadian art world, its critical countenances, people who, as MacKay puts it "by virtue of their recognized authority, have direct influence on or particular relevance to the Canadian art community". They are artists, critics, historians, curators, directors, teachers, collector, administrators, and politicians, many of them more than one of these. They are "critical" because what they countenance is what counts as art in this country today. "Critical" should be glossed as "authoritative", "legitimating".

It is too large to be a group portrait and bears little comparison with those colossal history paintings, for which a key is often supplied, and where the individuals are in some relationship with one another. Here there is no reference to the co-operation and competition, the gossip and jealousies, the ideological and linguistic barriers, the network of transactions and relationships which holds these people together. Here the juxtapositions along the length of the work are entirely accidental and incidental to its intention.

In an important sense this work is an official portrait, one in which the achievements, office or role of the subject is of as great, if not greater, consequence than the individuality of its holder. In so far as it is also a meditation on the humanity behind that authority, it can only be so within severe constraints imposed by the formula.

The process he has used may be termed a deconstructive one in that the method to which MacKay adhered for two years takes the elements traditionally associated with official portraiture and dismantles them.



They are, to adopt a distinction identified by Gombrich, "effigies" rather than "portraits". The essential elements of that traditional formula, which depend on features beyond the frame as much as those within it, may be summarized as: a dominating attention to the role of the subject rather than their individuality which heavily emphasizes the documentary aspect found in all portraiture; a technique to establish social or intellectual distance from the subject through which respect is commanded and control exercised; in response to the social context within which such portraits habitually operate certain formal constraints are observed: the medium of oil on canvas, the gilt frame, the discreet plaque which rarely gives any information on the artist, the company of other similar objects, the hole institutional paraphernalia which accompanies such portraits. In *Some Critical Countenances* these elements of the tradition are present in their absence. MacKay has taken them out of context and reversed them with the result that the work is itself critical. It critically examines, deconstructs, the authority of its subjects in as much as its methods deconstruct those conventions of representation that have traditionally reinforced the authority of its subjects.

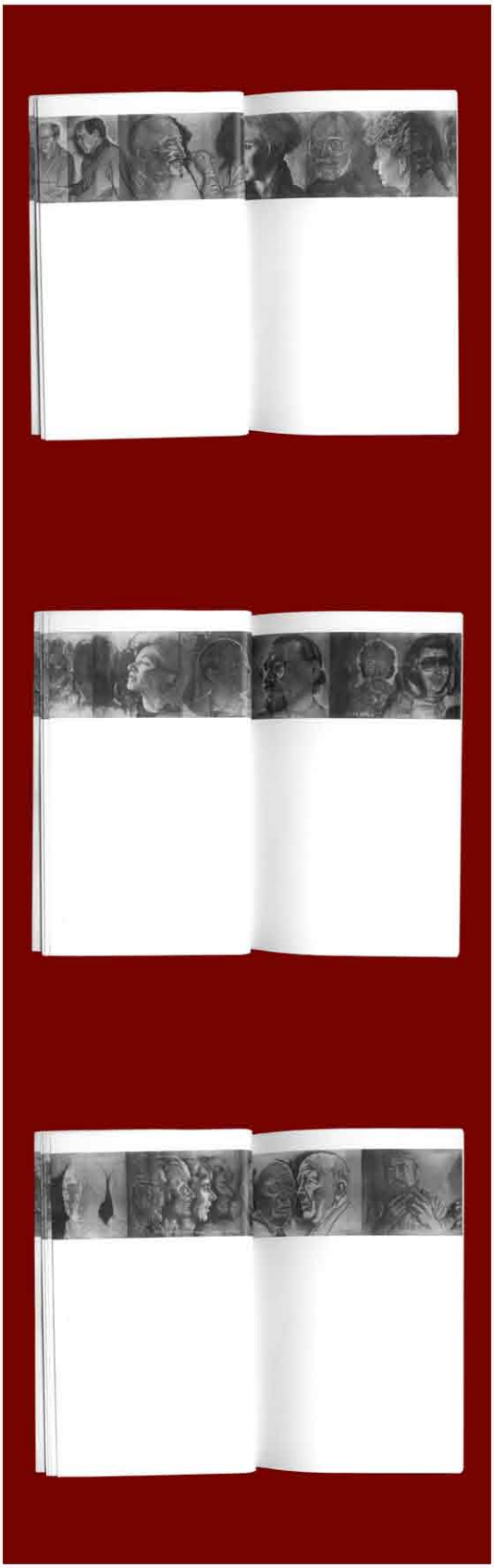
Whose Authority?

If the subject of this work is authority, what, it will be asked, are the authority for thus aligning these people, grounds for MacKay's own a spreading them out and naming them, before the public gaze?

Some Critical Countenances is partly the result of curiosity, part ingenuous search for a subject, part hubris. It disarms some criticisms for it appears that few can resist an invitation to be included in a roster of the critically important. It is quite possible that the work was begun just for the hell of it. But in the process it has become an insider's meditation on the nature of critical authority as it operates in the visual arts.

Thus the answer must be that MacKay's authority derives from the sociological fact that he is an insider, that he is a participant, as artist, curator, gallery director, jury member, in the community that he has filletted, and has been at both the giving and receiving ends of critical authority. But he also understands that as a maker of images he wields a power which is much harder to locate but which for centuries has commanded respect, if not more.

This work tests the authority that his own ability to capture likeness gives him. MacKay thus participates in the critical tendency of much recent art to examine the ways in which the authority of the image is constructed. In *Some Critical Countenances* it is the authority of a certain set of conventions for representing the human face that are examined, deconstructed. The project has changed. Needing subjects to paint, MacKay originally intended a series of portraits of art critics, Canadian critics and those whose writing has affected significantly the art made in Canada. Fascinated by the critics' apparent power apparently vested in their control of words,



and wanting to use his own authority as an image maker to challenge or debate it, he decided to collaborate with one. MacKay sees himself primarily as an artist. He thinks of me as a critic, who knows something about anthropology. But is it really words that divide us and define our roles? Do words have power over images? Is it words that, in the end, confer authority? He loves words too - guardedly - and is always testing the extent to which words define meaning or are needed to decode what he has done. These of course are some of the oldest philosophical issues.

Early on in our collaboration I pointed out that there is no one group, and certainly not the so-called 'critics', which has a monopoly over critical authority, the use of words for art. It is in fact exercised by artists, writers, publishers, and functionaries of all kinds. So we started to draw up lists. Lists of people to ask for lists. This was an invidious task which at once felt wrong, there was nowhere to draw the line. Powerful individuals there undoubtedly are in the Canadian art community, but on the whole authority has been collectively rather than individually created. It also seemed clear that there is now enough home-grown authority around to be able to leave out any other kind.

In the event, the selection was often circumstantial. It reflects a mainstream, centrist, still essentially WASP establishment. These are the people whom MacKay could conveniently meet and photograph on his "research" trips to Canada from Switzerland. Some of those who aren't here and should have been for the work to be properly representative, may just not have been around when he called or the slides didn't turn out well enough. But, in any case there was a new problem: there were simply too many people for a manageable series of discrete portraits. It was at this point that the critical nature of the project established itself.

MacKay has continually worked with a type of wrapping paper, five feet deep, taken, as much as he needed at a time, from a 200 foot roll and then tacked on the wall un-mounted and un-framed. A changing idea unrolled with the paper. Back in Switzerland, in December 1986, with his boxes of slides, he wrote to me: " By an extended drawing I mean utilizing a roll of my usual paper of indeterminate length that will accommodate at least one full year of drawing time and what ever number of faces that would result. What this does is provide me with a more open-ended and inclusive format and one that could deal with notation or stylistic alterations or interpretive changes (not quite sure what that means yet) that might occur or be necessary as the project and drawing untold. Well, what do you think??? ... Within this format we could still decide which faces are a must but it also allows so many other lips, ears, noses, eyes and blemishes to also attain the oh so sought after status of critical (why even you and I could be included)." And so we have been. MacKay had found a way of dispensing with lists, categories, hierarchies and frames.

Part of this critical community, he is not constrained by its discourse, its symposia, its texts. It is his gaze which has aligned them in this way and situated himself in their midst. It may be that an implicit theme of this work is that words give people power, power over art, a suspicion that it is through the use of words that, ultimately, critical authority is constituted. Against this suspicion MacKay draws on the power of the face. Critics having faces he, given the power of the artist over his subject, has power over them too.

The work, begun by being 'about' critics, with awe at their power, and delight in wielding his own, conjoined, has ended up by being 'about' critical authority. It is carried out in such a way that its methods question its own authority for being 'about' anything at all.

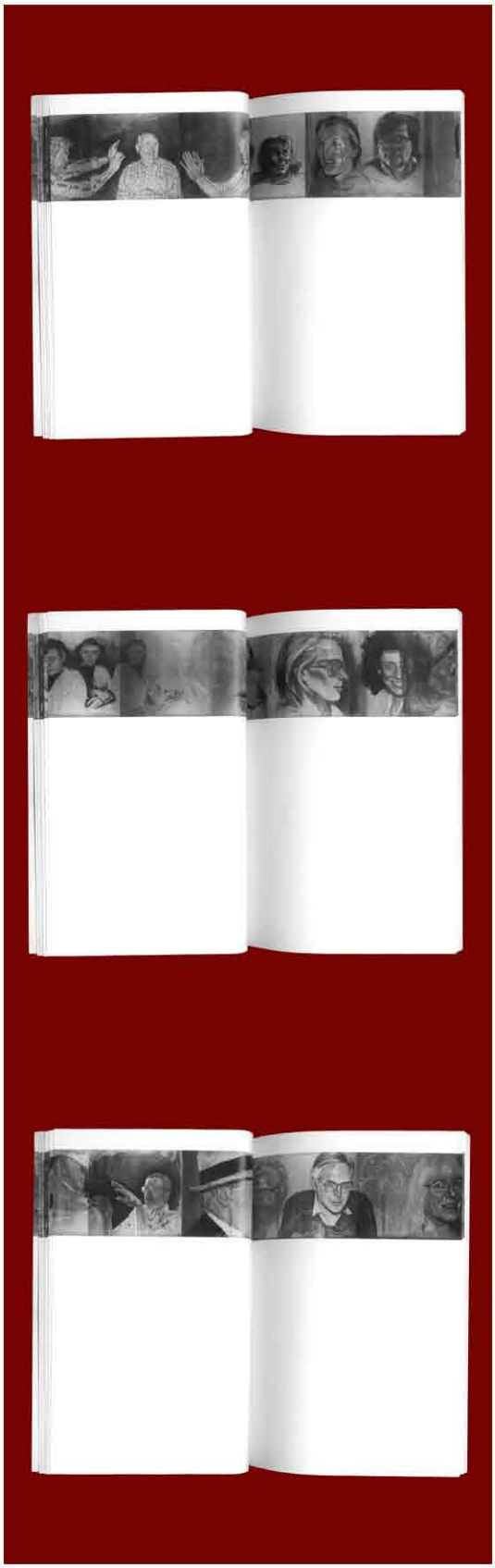
The Face, the Text and the Critic

As a collaboration, *Some Critical Countenances* freely admits to the interdependence of the representation of the human face, the interpretation of the text and the authority of the critic. As to the face: "Always behind its signs and its works, always within its secret interior and forever discreet, interpreting all historical totalities through its freedom of speech, the face is not 'of this world'. It is the origin of the world." (Derrida, *Violence and Metaphysics*, p. 103).

Learning to 'read' the human face is one of the earliest forms of socialization. Learning to 'read' the ways in which the face has been represented in the western art historical tradition is an important part of how we are socialized into a particular understanding of 'art' in our society. It commonly results in the inability to read the representation of the face in another culture correctly. The tradition of official portraiture plays its own determining role in this process.

The western tradition of humanist portraiture has been kept alive, despite its effacement from decades of fashionably correct art, its trivialization in official versions, and the immense attention paid to its photographic representation, by artists such as Francis Bacon, Frank Auerbach and Lucien Freud. We continue to think we can recognize, in what must always be schematic representations of the face, something of the sagacity, bitterness, generosity, humour and frustration that we know are there. But how can this be? And what, after Rembrandt, is the point of doing it'?

These are questions raised by the work of some other portraitists who scrutinize the tradition: the American painter Chuck Close, whose immense photo-realist close-ups gave new meaning to the phrase "warts and all" and the German Gerhard Richter. *Some Critical Countenances* bears some comparison with Richter's *Forty-eight Portraits* (1971-72) which exists in both an oil on canvas and a photographic version, and takes as its subject men, born in the 19th. century, who have profoundly influenced the modern world. Based on the kind of official portraits found in encyclopedias or

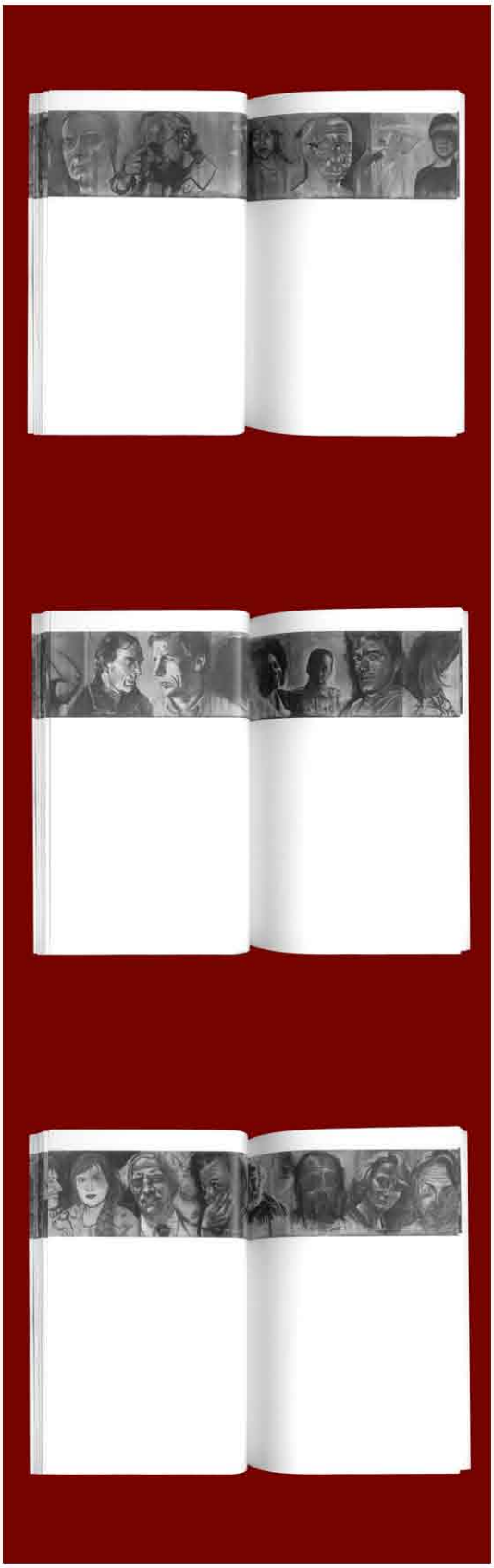


dictionaries, their selection was detached, circumstantial and aesthetic, driven by an interest in the impersonal accumulation of 'information' characteristic of the late '60s. Their installation is dictated by the architecture (that of the German pavilion at Venice for which the work was originally conceived) or by a neutral grid. This kind of comment on official" representation is one of the starting points of *Some Critical Countenances*. More recently, Hans Haake, in his portraits of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, appropriated the mode of the honorific portrait, including lavish gilded frames and velvet ropes to keep people away, to deadly effect.

Other artists have chosen to record the personalities or legends of their own milieu: Red Grooms in the United States, some of whose works are group portraits, Canadian artist Lyn Donoghue whose on going series of large-scale, full-frontal portraits record some of the best-known faces from Toronto's artistic community. Yet these are discrete works and although they have been shown together she has not attempted to keep them together as a series. Yvon Gallant did a series of full-length portrayals of his contemporaries in Moncton's cultural milieu, assertive, humourous yet ultimately disquieting. The sense of the subject is built up from their environment, accoutrements, dress and stance, but not at all from their faces, which are blank. Whether this emanates from the existential distress under which the Acadian community in Atlantic Canada can be assumed to be labouring, or from Gallant's inability to render faces, remains an open question. However their power rests to a considerable extent on this reversal of a fundamental expectation, that the face delivers essential information about the individual.

Both Donoghue and Gallant attempt to personalize, to render the idiosyncracies, to paint what they know as well as what they can see. MacKay confines himself to what the projected transparency gives him, to what he calls the "structured fidelity" of the slide. There is nothing remarkable about portrait painters using photo-graphs of their subject to supplement sittings, nor of painters in general working from projected slides. What I want to argue is that MacKay's dependence on the information projected, in conjunction with the other aspects of this work, the continuous series, the quick-fix style, the casual approach to its archival prospects, an accompanying text, locates this work near the Centre of the contemporary revival of the long-standing debate about the relationship between an original and its representation and the authority of both.

The contemporary French philosopher Jacques Derrida is one of the thinkers who has established the terms of the debate, and, for better or worse, his ideas, originally dealing with the literary text, have been transposed to works of visual art. There is no need to suppose been transposed to works o , or even cultural theorists, to that all artists have become philosophers assert that Derrida's ideas have contributed importantly to the theoretical climate for the making and reception of art in Canada as elsewhere.



A key issue is that of representation, the relationship between an 'original' and a 'copy', between the subject of a text or a work of art and the way it is represented. It is commonly believed that there is something less 'real' about a representation than an original. Derrida takes exception to this. The critical text itself, that which purports to interpret another so-called original text, is given a particular legitimacy by Derrida who maintains that language in being "about" something is not a mere substitute for that something, something more 'real' but, as what he terms "writing", has a fundamental identity of its own. Derrida advocates the deconstruction of such habits of mind, such commanding notions, and attempts to un-pick the relationship between signifier and signified. The question then becomes how a specific reading or version of the infinite number of potential readings that reside in the text, comes to have authority.

If it is accepted that *Some Critical Countenances* is more than a whole lot of portraits rolled into one, more than just a doing the same old thing in a different way, it can be set in the framework of this debate in a number of ways.

In so far as it is a representation, a 'reading' of certain faces, it has a legitimate existence independent of that of any original subject. The conventional relationship between the signifier, the marks on the paper, and what is signified, the faces, has been unravelled, superceded by the sheer enormity of the project.

As to the authority of his version, MacKay makes a clear materialist assertion – his 'reading' of a face is determined by what the camera, the slide and the projection give him, and by his facility in interpreting this information in an established graphic style.

Deconstruction would seem to match fairly closely what MacKay is attempting. The work sets out, not to deny, but to deconstruct the commanding notion' that the inwardness, the essential humanity of the human face, can be represented by a set of pictorial conventions. In this case the conventions are those of official portraiture which include: prestigious materials (usually oil on canvas), evidence of the labour rather than the originality of the artist, an approach both flattering and documentary that suggests social distance, and the end product, in its gilt frame, an icon. Each of these elements, or signifiers, has been questioned and re-worked in *Some Critical Countenances* with the consequence that everything about their relationship to the subject is open to query.

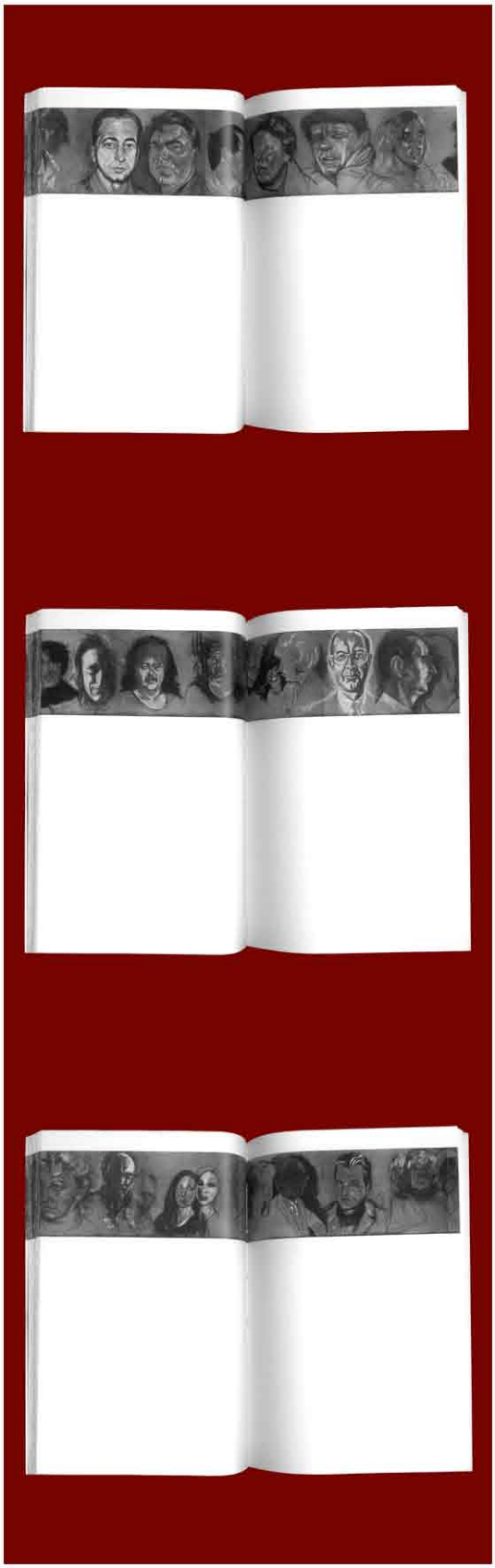
Now clearly this kind of reading depends, at some stage, on words. MacKay's interest in the interchange between word and image is not new. His attitude towards words has passed from resentment, masked by his verbal clowning (relished by those who know him), through his wordless word works, to resignation.

He recognizes the need to harness them, and that they can outline a history, discern a structure, establish a frame of reference, and even that, if Derrida is right, their existence is entirely independent. The relationship between critical text and visual image has been well expressed by Norman Bryson: "Where painting continues to galvanize writing, that writing is both more and less than painting's supplement ... Writing is the trace of an encounter which will never know its object in absolute terms, but which will continue for as long as the image can circulate within society; for as long as the image remains alive". (Bryson, *Vision and Painting*, p.86)

MacKay's attitude towards language, written and spoken, has always been highly ambivalent. Earlier works have been about words and their power, or lack of it. There were book works, made in the late 70s, or books with the texts in some way obscured, or edited in an irreversible way. His book *A Book Of Not Knowing When We Are Going To Die Or Grow Up And Of Only Knowing A Little Bit* was handsomely bound in yellow and, as Alf Bogusky pronounced in his foreword: "Consider this bound book. The format suggests authority, truth, unimpeachable knowledge made accessible - wisdom as resource." Brief evocative chapters by John Bentley Mays peter out and the rest of the 320 pages are blank, silent.

MacKay learnt that all words prickle with energy when, in 1975, he set out to write Joyce's Ulysses backwards: a yearning for free speech, without constraints. His mountain paintings have all involved text, rueful, laconic, rather than actually ironic. They are not deliberated but stumble out, grammar and spelling irrelevant. Names are words too. *Some Critical Countenances* incorporates the scrawled names and the scrawled (erased) badinage. I suggested that it was inappropriate. You can see where he painted it out. Perhaps I was wrong.

As for his own words, when MacKay talks it's as though he erases half of what he says. The indeterminacy of his own talk contrasts with the fluency of his mimicry where he seems free of the constraints and the frustrations of language. He once sent me a cautionary tape, a Monologue made in his small studio in Switzerland. Actually it was recorded off his one-man radio station, Radio Bern-boring-Bern, evidently a purveyor of cultural anarchy in which a home town DJ gets to tangle with the art stars. It instantly populated my room in Halifax with the characters you would hear droning or fizzing at any tiresome art symposium where the' art' seems to get away. MacKay is a brilliant mimic who nails down every verbal pretension known to art discourse. His devastating attacks stop short of annihilation because he is a kind man and because he knows that he is in his own line of fire.

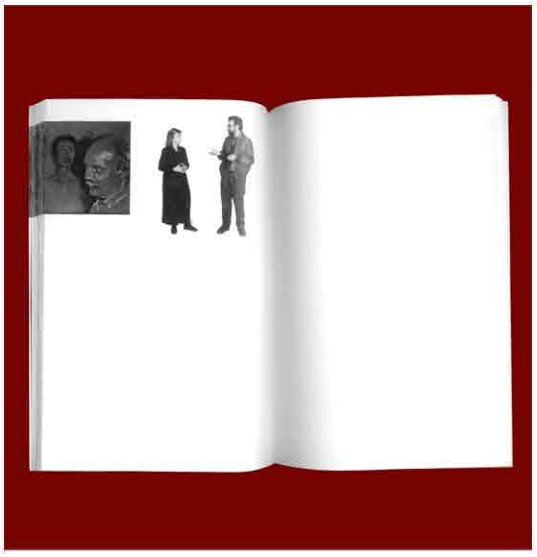


The Idea and the Picture: Conceptual Representation Deconstructed

In the context of portraiture the illustrational style of *Some Critical Countenances* might appear to preempt any pretensions to high art style. In fact it knowingly substitutes a populist style on a support which will clearly not stand the test of time. These reversals of expectation have been explained as deconstructive procedures. But before examining them more closely we should look at their roots in his own earlier work. Amongst other things, *Some Critical Countenances* is a synthesis of several directions which have previously been in conflict in earlier works, or else the works themselves were about the conflict.

MacKay readily relates himself with a whole range of popular illustrational styles which in their upper echelons are referred to as "Maritime realism". MacKay points out that there is no need to puzzle over "Maritime" or any other regional "realism" when calendars, mailorder catalogues, chocolate boxes and the Star Weekly were the representations of the world that surrounded many of its practitioners growing up in the'40s and '50s. MacKay found he could do this kind of 'realism' with the best of them, as he puts it: "From the first time I picked up a pencil I had this kind of literal talent", and so he went to art school.

A student at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design when D.C. Mackay was president, he acquired what are called the traditional skills in an environment where those skills were doggedly defended against the various assaults offered by the 20th. century. "This work just catches up from where I'd stopped in 1969." It also incorporates what he has learned since, for he stayed on in Halifax, working first as a 'scenic artist' at the CBC, as a 'display artist' at Louisbourg, then at the Centennial Art Gallery (which was the predecessor of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia) and then back to NSCAD as the Director of the Anna Leonowens Gallery during the early years of Garry Kennedy's presidency, where he learned quite other things. He was subjected to the critical assault on accepted forms of representation. The dominance of the 'idea' was accompanied by a narrow range of permissible expressions of the idea, commonly textual and photographic. There was, for a time, no painting or drawing in the sense that MacKay had understood. He observed the paramount position given to 'information', its gathering and sorting and collating, as aesthetic procedures, dictated by some 'impersonal' criterion that must be allowed to work itself through to its logical conclusion. The work of Hanne Darboven and On Kawara, known to MacKay because they were influential at NSCAD, was characteristic of this tendency. MacKay also valued. particularly the visual beauty which Dennis Oppenheim brought even to conceptual works, the perception and humour of Michael Snow and the poetic quality of Vito Acconci's work.



The dogged constant throughout this period was Gerald Ferguson who as a prime mover at NSCAD encapsulated its aesthetic with rigour and economy.

Purely conceptual, the work of Lawrence Weiner, long associated with the College, also left an impression. Twenty years of experience later it can be seen to lead almost inevitably to *Some Critical Countenances:*

Carried to great lengths.
Carried to (relatively) great lengths.
Brought up (relatively) short. Brought up short.

All over a matter of time.

(Weiner, Works 1977, p. 419)

Some of the strictures of conceptual art were retained when 'painting' returned to NSCAD, for it did so under the labour-intensive prescriptions of Jeffrey Spalding, Eric Cameron and later Garry Kennedy. A certain time consuming formula was adhered to, and completed to exhaustion, dictated by some factor inherent in the materials and the method. All this has been absorbed by MacKay and combined with other modes of expression, including those inimical to it. *Some Critical Countenances* can be seen as a reconciliation rather than what Bruce Ferguson, writing on MacKay's earlier work, saw as the "head-on collision of two narrow value systems" to which MacKay was a witness and, during the 'conceptual' years at NSCAD, "an unacknowledged and unsuccessful mediator of this cultural disjuncture". I would suggest that this work goes some way to resolving the dilemma.

The years (1975-83) at Lethbridge, and subsequently as director of the Mendel Art Gallery in Saskatoon, took MacKay away from the dogmatism of NSCAD, which would either stimulate or extinguish. He was in a position to see again that other perspectives are permissible and to enquire into their sources of power, to test whether they could issue the same directives as the force field generated at NSCAD in the early'70s had done.

When he left Canada for Switzerland in 1983 MacKay had rediscovered two subjects he wanted to work on mountains and faces. The Western tradition of humanist portraiture and the sublimity of the landscape are both daunting prospect, the one an essential vehicle for the realization of an anthropo-centric universe, the other a possible escape route. He could take them seriously as such and simultaneously enjoy the fact that they are part of a worn out stock in trade. MacKay's interest in such a paradox grew, characteristically, out of a deeply serious commitment and an uproarious instinct to spoof. He has probably just decided somewhere that he can live with paradox, and paradox is neatly incorporated into *Some Critical Countenances*.

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Foreword

The Art Gallery of Nova Scotia is pleased to introduce to our visitors a unique exhibition - a drawing five hundred and forty-five feet long by Allan Harding MacKay. It is very appropriate that we welcome Allan back to Nova Scotia and include his work as one of the first exhibitions in the new Art Gallery of Nova Scotia building. Allan is no stranger to the region, having worked here as an artist and as Director of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design's Anna Leonowens Gallery. His role in the Canadian art community as an artist, curator and gallery director is well known and in all these areas he has earned the respect of his peers.

It is always a pleasure to work with Charlotte Townsend-Gault and I want to thank her for her contribution to the exhibition and for her essay on the work. I would like to thank our Acting Exhibitions Curator, Susan Foshay, for the coordination of the exhibition, and the staff of the gallery who have worked on this production.

Our special gratitude is extended to The Canada Council for its financial contribution to this exhibition.

Please enjoy *Some Critical Countenances* and we welcome your "critical' comment.

Bernard Riordon
Director

First, in Switzerland, came the series of Variations on Hodler. Mimicking the painting style of the country's best known modernist, MacKay inserted his own anxious image beside that of the confident master. They were intended to work metaphorically: "the fledgling artist 'getting into the picture' with the image of an established artist; the unknown vying for attention with the known within the same frame". These works related directly to other self portraits, which are also often portraits of family, friends, acquaintances. In these he appears as a quizzical bystander, trying to see himself in the light of others, using their faces, identities, to establish his own, as he did notably in *Five Guys* (1985), where he appears as one of five grown men who had known each other well as boys in Charlottetown.

The graphic style of his childhood, the facility with it, developed during his formal art training, the essentialist axioms for which the idea rather than the perception mattered, picked up from NSCAD from the late '60s to mid-70s, the grasp of art-world power politics learned as an administrator, have resulted in a work of synthesis. It is this conjunction of influences which allows MacKay to take on the tradition and invert the essentials, which enables what amounts to a systematic deconstruction of a set of conventions for representing the face.

MacKay has also, since he left Canada, set himself up as a 'conventional' portraitist and works to commission. His subjects have included the Donald Sobey family, Toni Onley, Tak Tanabe and John and Joice Hall. Photography notwithstanding, portraits showing evidence of an artist's hand are still in demand. And as he puts it: "The eye and the hand haven't been bypassed by photography. That's a simplistic argument - there's still the wonder of being able to create an image".

What this pedigree has allowed, and what justifies the claim that *Some Critical Countenances* is a work of deconstruction, is its response to, and inversion of, the tradition of official portraiture. Official portraiture relies on a formula, operates within a set of predetermined constraints. So, but in a rather different sense, does *Some Critical Countenances*. The use of prestigious and durable materials; evidence of the artist's labour rather than the artist's originality; a documentary approach to the subject and a technique that suggests social distance; the iconic nature of the finished object - all these constraining factors have been turned inside out, not denied but deconstructed.

So how is it done? The prestige that still accrues to oil on canvas is flaunted by these oil and pastel scribbles on brown wrapping paper. The power of the framed, discrete image is inverted by these conjoined ranks of images which unroll like a cartoon-strip, like the tape that records and delivers information electronically everywhere, like a movie. And it is evanescent too. The work does not exude the staying power associated with portraits made for posterity.

There is a documentary element in all portraiture, as Breckenridge clarifies in discussing the evolution of the genre: "As a work of art, the portrait in this highest sense can only come into being when society's conception of the worth and importance of individuals has reached an advanced level; but it is also necessary for the individual to be conceived of as existing within the time span of history and for this existence to be regarded as meaningful. The 'true' portrait, therefore, is not only a work of art but a consciously conceived document of history" (Breckenridge, Likeness, p.5). *Some Critical Countenances* is a work of record. The difference here is that although its subjects were chosen for who they are, no visible reference is made to their roles, offices or achievements, there are none of the usual attributes of dress, props or context, no institutional context, no signs of hierarchy and none of the interrelationships which glue these people together. Any expectations of this kind of documenting are foiled by the mere statement of their existence as named individuals. This is when one looks beyond, searching for the "inwardness" and this is where one is stopped short, as in all official portraits, by the limitations of a formulaic style.

This work conforms to the criterion of labour intensive work by the artist, but only in the sense that MacKay laboured long on the ensemble, on the laconic repetition of a cliché. There is none of that high degree of finish expected in the real thing. Rather, in getting it down quickly he has followed age-old principles of image construction as used by ten minute street artists, and owing something to Degas too. "Illustrative, I'd call it, I want to develop it further" and then in a characteristic ambivalence: "The style is either incidental, or very key. I'm not sure which."

Whatever social or intellectual distancing techniques are in operation here, they cannot then be the style which is vernacular as compared with the patrician effects for which the genre conventionally aims. Here distance between viewer and subject is established by its sensational, awe-inspiring aspect, that silences with the sheer enormity of such an undertaking. Portraits tend to build people up, this immense sequence cuts them down to size. It is equalizing and nonhierarchical. Paradoxically its vast scale works to reduce rather than aggrandize.

The work bypasses the requirement for a fully 'finished' work, it has the feel of a cartouche, preparatory sketches or jottings for something else. The degree of facture allowed and the degree of personal intervention by the artist appear at first to be very great, much more than can be countenanced in true official portraits. This style is a sort of shorthand, or a sort of poke in the eye, for the penetrating and time consuming analytical gaze. Yet the irony is that this style, not so revealing that it deserves such repetition, was allowed to consume nearly two years of his time, without deviance or development.

He has made himself dependent on a form of note-taking, shooting slides, projecting them, using their distortions and what he calls their structural fidelities alike. While at work it is that that concerns him - making a good copy of the slide, not necessarily trying to 'catch' the character. Yet the artist is constrained, by the camera and by his procedure. The portrait sequence depends on photography; his portrayals contain no more and no less information than the slides he has taken are able to project. He is on guard against any other information, recollected or invented, by himself or anyone else. He has submitted to an impersonal formula, subjugated his individuality to an idea. This is a remarkable blend of the NSCAD aesthetic with the formulaic constraints of the official portrait tradition.

Extended Drawing: Extended Metaphor

The analysis and historical reduction implied by the deconstructive force of his work is complemented by the possibility of seeing it as a metaphor based on a literal and materialist reading of its method of construction.

From what has been said so far *Some Critical Countenances* could have been made anywhere within the reach of western art history, but there is a sense in which the construction of this work addresses something peculiar to the contemporary Canadian situation and could be taken as a metaphor for it. The Canadian visual art community is a small and (geographically) extended world where, until recently, everyone knew, or knew of, everyone else. It was dominated by some old colonial powers and a new imperialist neighbour. Although its diversity is now much greater, there is still a connectedness which is unknown say in the United States.

I take this work to be in several ways a comment on the extent, and the connections, of the Canadian art community. Although it has its share of autocrats, egomaniacs and poseurs, and although there are undoubtedly individuals who play key roles and some stars, most people would admit the interdependence of their contribution to this community with those of other people. In the end, the critical authority countenanced in this work is collectively and not individually constructed. To this extent the work is the antithesis of Red Grooms' narrative enshrinement of a typical night at the Cedar Bar, the legendary New York hang-out of a group of modernist heroes, and their women, or of Ed Keinholz's Barney's Beanery, Los Angeles' late '60s version of the places where bohemia is created, and the group of would-be mythic individuals who frequent them.

That it has ended up being a Canadian group has a certain significance. Canada, Canadian art, is underrepresented. The hazy or patronizing misinformation that floats through the foreign press testifies to this. We have had the conscious efforts to create or reinforce Canadian cultural myths and heroes, in the manner of Joyce Wieland and John Boyle. A different, more ironic, attention is

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directed towards the culture in Garry Kennedy's materialist deconstruction of the Canadian collection at the Art Gallery of Ontario. *Some Critical Countenances* is somewhere between them. MacKay wants to assert something about the roles of the players in Canada's cultural scene, but doesn't want to make stars.

For better or worse directions have been set collectively rather than by individuals, by committees, institutions, boards and coalitions, whose members understand that their position, their work, is dependent on that of many others. This situation is well described by Howard Becker in Art Worlds. It is a collective and political struggle rather than the pitting of the lone individual single-handed against an uncomprehending and uncomprehended adversary.

A number of forces have come together in recent years to create this situation: the collective work of ANNPAC (Association of National Non-Profit Artists' Centres), and CARFAC (Canadian Artists Representation/ Federation des Artistes Canadiens); the cultural alliances formed in several provinces in response to the policies, or the threatened policies, of the Conservative Party and the Free Trade debate; a greater appreciation, or in some cases suspicion, of the role played by the Canada Council and other funding agencies in the formation of Canada's culture; the intensification of the debates over censorship and patronage. In many cases these issues figure in the work of artists who thus define themselves as cultural critics as well as complex psyches, visionaries, highly skilled, disenfranchised individuals, or any of the other ways variously considered essential to the definition of "artist".

This is not a work that joins the political debate so much as one that co-opts it, that represents it by representing the debaters, all sides. In this metaphor of extension there are no hierarchies, but there may be no solutions either.

Finally, the answer to the question: whose authority? *Some Critical Countenances* makes glaringly obvious that the artist is the author of his own authority. But he needs the others too. MacKay has fittingly painted himself into his own work, yet his relationship with the others is very different from the positions he took up vis-a-vis Hodler. This is not the self-quizzing uncertainty of the Hodler portraits, nothing of the outsider, the "difference" of his stance in Five Guys. Paradoxically, he has been given the authority to do what he has done by his participation in the milieu he has drawn.