

Patrick Mahon: GIFTwrap

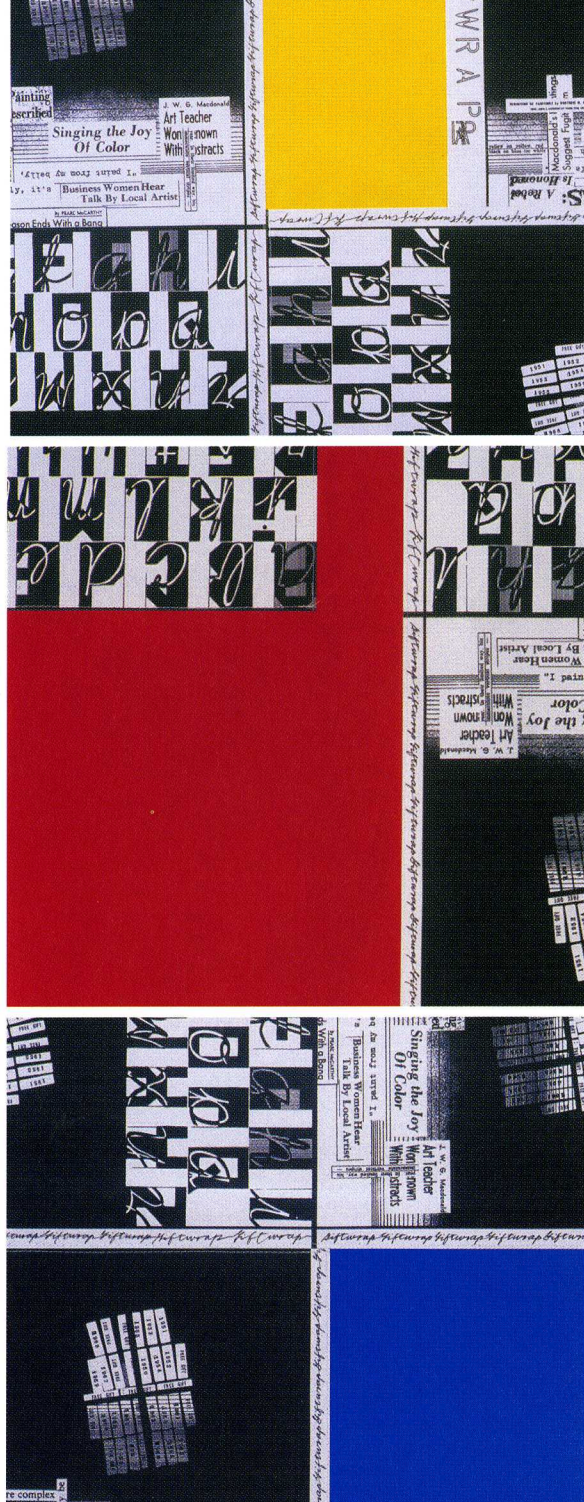
MOST ART MUSEUMS and their collections are devoted to art objects created for the purpose of aesthetic delectation. Designed to reflect the art of their time, such collections contain works that are held in the public trust and inform us of the particular histories of the nation or region, as well as of the tastes and attitudes of their roster of directors and curators.

The origins of art museums can be traced back to the curiosity cabinets of Renaissance princes and scholars that manifested a broad fascination with collecting that emerged in the 15th century. These cabinets, little 'museums' designed to be encyclopedic in scope, contained collections of objects that were like compendiums of little worlds. Also of interest in regard to collections is the fact that there is a strong historical relationship between the development of the department store and the museum. Both borrowed ideas from the concept of the World's Fair — a spectacle of dazzling display, exotic merchandise, expanses of glass and

specialized salespeople — that focused on the *flâneur*, who was empowered to stroll and view a myriad of merchandise and wares.

Today many shops in art galleries are placed in prominent locations near the front entrance, and the managers who run them have experience in department store retailing. While, in our consumer culture, a museum may not function as a temple of consumer desire and a department store may not be a museum of unreachable goods, there is a clear reciprocal role for museums with respect to consumerism: the glorification of goods. Not only do museums and galleries celebrate and condone materialism, they make the acquisition of objects seem noble and valuable.

Many of the fine arts galleries of today came into existence because of the 'gifting process', the donation of a large body of artworks from an estate, family or artist thus forming the identity of the museum. The very health of today's museum collecting



relies more and more on the 'gifting' of works of art. The selection of objects to be donated/acquired is decided upon according to the context of the overall collection and how the works might fit within the dialogue and the mandate of the institution.

Patrick Mahon is among a group of artists and curators who have recently become fascinated with the process of collecting, and who raise critical questions about representation, patronage and populism in the museum context. Responding to the museum's historical ideology of autonomy and purity, there is a project of deconstructing the myths that exist around the gifting and collecting process. While collecting may be the stylized and distilled essence a gallery extends regarding art's orientation toward life, there is also a conceptual relationship between collecting and consuming. Collecting *is* consumption — it is the pursuit of inessential luxury goods — a quest for self-completion within the marketplace and ultimately a reflection of our historical times.

GIFTwrap takes its impetus from the permanent collection of the Art Gallery of Hamilton. A public art project, it engages ideas about the gallery's relationship to everyday life, considers questions about commodity and street culture and advances the notion of the artwork as gift. Mahon researched the collection at the AGH, centering on work produced during the 1960s, many of which are modernist abstract paintings by significant Canadian artists such as Hortense Gordon, Jock Macdonald, Paul-Emile Borduas, Jack Bush, William Ronald, Guido Molinari, Rita Letendre, Jean-Paul Riopelle, and L.L. Fitzgerald. Of particular interest to Mahon in the context of his research was the 'rap' that surrounded the work in the popular press. The 1950s was a critical period, an era when internationalism and modernism permeated the art world. Many of our notions of aesthetic modernism have been predominantly associated with the views of the eminent art critic Clement Greenberg. Regarded as the father of American art criticism, he was renowned for his writings

and early support of the Abstract Expressionist artists of the 1940s and 50s such as Franz Kline, Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko, and of the Colour Field painters whose work fulfilled the modernist tendency of art to progress toward being a reflection of itself, as opposed to a representation of external reality and social life. For Greenberg the work of art, as an idealist construct, explored its formal potential within the prescribed limits of painting or sculpture without interference from the economic, social and political realities that existed outside its borders.

Patrick Mahon is certainly not a contemporary of the modernist artists and works he researched and therefore approaches his own work from a different perspective. From his research, Mahon developed a graphic design based on the accumulated visual and textual information he found. He generated printed wallpaper to be used to produce banners and as wrapping paper. Each of eight banners thus came to bear one letter of the word 'GIFT', with each

letter appearing twice overall. The semi-abstract letters in black and white were affixed to backgrounds of primary colours — red, yellow and blue. These banners were made to be dispersed throughout interior and exterior sites in Hamilton, including the GO Transit Bus Depot, City Hall, the John C. Munro International Airport and the Art Gallery of Hamilton, among others. The banners are a speller's 'scavenger hunt' for piecing together the letters that form the word GIFT. A viewer observant enough to locate the message at the bottom of the banner is directed to pick up their free giftwrap in the same design as the letters — available at the Gallery Shop for the asking.

By associating his work with the criticism and text of the day, Mahon counters Greenberg and his modernist manifesto, transgressing the specifically defined boundaries of an historical aesthetic discipline. Also by focusing on textual language, he illustrates how two systems of signification may lend themselves to the artistic purpose of a contemporary age.

Language and graphics — a series of abstract lexical units that are contiguous with what they mean – affirm the tangibility of language both through its representational ability to stand for something and to stand on its own as a ‘banner’. This relationship is sufficient for the reproduction of visual form and meaning. The words themselves, drawn from the critical interpretation of the works studied, form the letters and formulate the graphic design of the banners and gift wrap. Mahon thus changes the form of the printed word, interfering with the dominant visuality of signage, working against the monocular insistence of vision often associated with modernist painting.

Encountering Patrick Mahon’s productions reminds me of Andrew Drummond’s book, *Images from Another Archaeology*, in which the narrative centers on a traveller moving through a landscape of rooms, through the door of dreams into a realm of fragmentation: fragments of inscribed slate, remnants of topographical sites,

archaeological sites which offer no explanation as to where the illumination has come from. Patrick Mahon is working in a different field from archaeology, but his methodology is also that of an anthropologist of sorts. He is a translator in the sense that he extracts signs from one context and transfers them to another, particularly by working with material that is not a product of his generation.

The inclusion of language or bits of language is a familiar strategy in the history of the art of the past century. The Cubists incorporated it in their collages and some of the Futurists, Dadaists and Surrealists combined text fragments in their works. In such works, the visual field of art becomes a site for the letter, word or text. Word and image compete for the idea, or often compete with incongruous ideas, to produce visual non-sequiturs. The Cubist-referenced space absorbed the bits of language into its own potential for contemplative reading, conveying an almost poetic intent and restricting the role of language. The

possibilities inherent in such approaches seem to exclude a concern with differing kinds of space. This is what Mahon contradicts. Rather than existing in a state of inert passivity, a condition of tension functions in his work wherein two systems, linguistic and visual, are thrown together — both asserting their difference even as they interact. Therefore, in this context, language can inhabit objects and objects can be possessed by language.

Through the means described, the artist attempts an aesthetic reintegration of the culture of the gallery with the culture of the public space. This work is, as a result, aesthetically and discursively integrated into the AGH framework. The gallery is a place where objects are stored in vaults and exhibited under controlled conditions for posterity. In his work, Mahon aims to reduce the distances between art and popular culture, to blur the lines between life and language, but with a specific critical focus.

The rapid flow of signs and images that saturate the fabric of contemporary society reflect our ongoing fetishization of commodities — be they art or otherwise. In Mahon’s world, art ceases to exist within some separate enclaved reality, as it would exist in the vaults of the AGH, and instead enters the realm of production and reproduction so that everything falls under its expanded rubric. The work’s social dynamic — the fact that this piece can actually be used, that it has a function as gift wrap, that it is free, and that once used it can be thrown away, counters the overall purpose associated with museum’s mission of promoting permanency.

Certainly, forerunners of this method of democratization include the Dadaists and the Pop artists, but the Dadaists were less prone to acknowledging a participatory role for the spectator. And certainly Mahon knows that one way of bridging the estrangement between artist and public is to make art available to large groups of the population

through serial production. Serializing is not a new phenomenon if we think of traditional bronze casting. But Mahon is less interested in the multiplication of a work drawn from other works and more in a devaluation of the concept of uniqueness. The uniqueness of the work of art encourages market speculation that profits dealers and collections. Multiplying the work, as Mahon has, frees it from that kind of commercialism and brings aesthetic enjoyment to the masses, thus allowing them to do as they wish with the 'art'.

An artwork is not an isolated physical phenomenon. It is a manifestation of a moment in the historical process of living. There is a fundamental split between the internal world of the artist and the greater world outside. This makes the art world's rare encounters with the political and social arena that much more challenging. Mahon's desire to communicate ideas rather than solely to create paintings or other works is significant in this context. The rendering of

the text recognizes that denotation is arbitrary — that language is a social construction for interpreting, rather than for recreating, reality. Like many Conceptual artists before his time, (where the idea precedes the image), he questions not only the process of art-making but also the support systems that present it. Patrick Mahon examines and exposes the work of art's affiliation with its external surroundings and explores and visually highlights its contextual frame of reference. As well, the authority of the museum as institution is undermined. He shows us how existing reality may give visible shape and form to a work of art and how the art institution sanctions that production. In this respect Mahon provokes critical thought on how art is represented in public, both within and outside the gallery.

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