BORDERLINES OF POETRY AND ART:
VANCOUVER, AMERICAN MODERNISM, AND THE FORMATION OF THE
WEST COAST AVANT-GARDE, 1961-69

by

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ABSTRACT

In 1967, San Francisco poet Robin Blaser titled his Vancouver-based journal *The Pacific Nation* because the imaginary nation that he envisaged was the "west coast." Blaser was articulating the mythic space that he and his colleagues imagined they inhabited at Simon Fraser University and the University of British Columbia: a nation without borders, without nationality, and bound by the culture of poetry. The poetic practices of the San Francisco Renaissance, including beat, projective, and Black Mountain poetics, had taken hold in Vancouver in 1961 with poet Robert Duncan’s visit to the city which had catalyzed the *Tish* poetry movement. In 1963, Charles Olson, Allen Ginsberg, and Robert Creeley participated in the Vancouver Poetry Conference, an event that marked the seriousness and vitality of the poetic avant-garde in Vancouver.

The dominant narrative of avant-garde visual art in Vancouver dates its origins to the late 1960s, with the arrival of conceptualism, especially the ideas and work of Dan Graham and Robert Smithson. By contrast, this thesis argues for an earlier formation of the avant-garde, starting with the *Tish* poetry movement and continuing with a series of significant local events such as the annual Festival of the Contemporary Arts (1961-71), organized by B.C. Binning and Alvin Balkind, who was the curator of the Fine Arts Gallery at the University of British Columbia. The diverse artistic and intellectual practices of Robert Duncan, John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Stan Brakhage, and Marshall McLuhan presented at the Festivals were absorbed and adapted not only by poets and writers but also by artists, including Ian Wallace, Roy Kiyooka, Iain Baxter, Gary Lee-Nova, and Michael Morris.
The cross-fertilization of avant-garde poetry and art was an international phenomenon. In New York, “anti-formal” art also embraced Cage and Cunningham as aesthetic models. Its effect in Vancouver was to de-stabilize European traditions of art that had been dominant. In the 1960s, Vancouver avant-garde artists constructed the west coast as an alternative space – alternative to American militarism and anti-communism, to Euro-Canadian cultural traditions and to the artistic dominance of New York. They helped to create a vital, transnational Pacific region.
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For my mother Monika
INTRODUCTION

West Coast Counter-Narratives:
Framing Vancouver Cultural Practices in the 1960s

I wish to put together an imaginary nation. It is my belief that no other nation is possible, or rather, I believe that authors who count take responsibility for a map which is addressed to travellers of the earth, the world, and the spirit. Images of our cities must join our poetry.

- Robin Blaser, *The Pacific Nation*  

In this remote, uncrowded, lotus-eating city, seemingly far from many of the world's agonies and excesses, there is room for art to grow, even in the face of (or perhaps *because of*) vast public and official indifference. Though isolated, yet there are very strong umbilical cords connecting Vancouver with the artistic "precious body fluids" elsewhere...A Western sense of freedom and expansion, an absence of rhetoric, and a need to search and probe into and beyond the sound barrier...

- Alvin Balkind  

The CITY no longer exists, except as a cultural ghost for tourists.

- Marshall McLuhan  

By the late 1960s, the west coast of North America had already achieved mythic status as Lotusland, Land of Eternal Youth, and land of freedom, love and the counterculture. Robin Blaser, poet of the San Francisco Renaissance and cultural guru in Vancouver, titled his journal *The Pacific Nation* because the imaginary nation that he was envisioning, one of open and free discourse, intellectual rigour and spiritual

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travel, was the nation of the “west coast.” When Alvin Balkind, curator of the Fine Arts Gallery at the University of British Columbia, proclaimed Vancouver’s natal artistic connections, he was referring primarily to the umbilical cords between Vancouver and both San Francisco and Los Angeles, ones that symbolized shared post-war artistic and cultural histories. An avant-garde of modernist poets and artists had formed and was practicing with vigour on the west coast of North America; it was as if there was an invisible north-south line connecting Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle, and Vancouver. Writers and artists travelled up and down this line, with a majority of the impetus travelling from the south to the north. From the early 1960s, Vancouver’s cultural scene started to transform from one of colonial provincialism to that of an edgy and thoroughly modern one - vanguard poetry, experimental printing presses, hard-edge painting, pop art, and collaborative multimedia became central practices and, indeed, Vancouver began to develop its own artistic identity.

My thesis examines art practices in Vancouver between 1961 and 1968, a period that encompasses several distinct phases or shifts both locally and internationally: the birth of the “west coast”; the renewed artistic interest in early twentieth-century avant-garde movements, such as dada and surrealism; the increasing agitation and violence in Vietnam; the de-colonization of African nations.

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4 Blaser founded and edited The Pacific Nation at the beginning of his long tenure in the English Department at Simon Fraser University. The first issue (there were only two ever published) included contributions from Gerry Gilbert, Stan Persky and Karen Tallman from Vancouver, as well as American modern poets such as Charles Olson, Michael McClure, George Stanley. The cover of the first issue is a doodle-like image with moonlight and water in the background and a flowery, rocky and forested shore in the foreground. The letters of “Pacific Nation” are reflected by the moonlight in the water and to the right, a wild dog is howling at the moon – a harmonious call of nature (in contrast, for example, to the violent dog in Jack Shadbolt’s Dog Among Ruins, 1947). In the centre foreground is a partially filled-in vertical figure eight, alluding to both the symbol of eternity and the yin yang, both symbols which would have resonated with the west coast interest in eastern mysticism and notions of balance and unity in the universe.

5 Joy and Celebration, 3.
and the creation of the "third world"; the politics of conscience followed by post-
1968 cynicism; and, increasing economic prosperity in North America. The period is
diverse and lacks cohesiveness and, as such, can hardly be treated as a monolithic era.
Art production in Vancouver was equally diverse. It was implicated in larger regional
and international practices and politics. Specifically, Vancouver was on the west
coast circuit. Vancouver curators, teachers and artists considered themselves as part
of the avant-garde of the west coast, an avant-garde based in the literary and poetic
practices of the 1950s and early 1960s in California, namely, beat poets and poets in
the tradition of Black Mountain College in North Carolina. It was not simply by
virtue of Vancouver's proximity to California or its location at the end-of-the-line that
the city transformed into an urban avant-garde in its own right. Californian
modernists had a huge stake in Vancouver as a west coast city. It could extend the
"west coast nation" further up the Pacific, into nature and, ultimately, into Canada – a
country that for American dissidents and exiles represented an alternative to the
particular Cold War politics in the United States. However, while it seems clear that
American modernism dominated as Vancouver's foundational aesthetic model,
Vancouver was not simply a passive receptacle or empty void that, by rote, performed
California avant-gardism. As with each city in the "pacific nation," Vancouver had its
own artistic histories that shaped its avant-garde. Specifically, the "new art" of the
1960s was a rejection of the tradition of lyrical landscape painting that had dominated
art practice in Vancouver in the 1950s and early 1960s.6

Already, the writing of this project is riddled with ambivalent terms that come
laden with particular implications and connotations, namely, "the sixties," "avant-

6 In the 1950s, painters such as Jack Shadbolt, Alistair Bell, J.A.S. MacDonald, Don Jarvis and Gordon
Smith formed a loosely connected school of expressionistic and figurative painters in Vancouver. See
Scott Watson, "Art in the Fifties: Design, Leisure, and Painting in the Age of Anxiety," in Vancouver:
garde” and “west coast.” The first has come to connote particular notions of culture and politics more than an actual epoch. Even as we enter the 21st century, “the sixties” continues to be used as a popular phrase to describe certain aspects of culture: youth idealism, revolutionary politics, psychedelic aesthetics, and the rhetoric of freedom and peace. Like most clichés or stereotypes, it has been used both positively and negatively: as a nostalgic signifier of endless possibilities and the promise of social change, and, alternatively, to refer to a state of naïve and indulgent narcissism, or as Thomas Crow writes, “the wellspring of all contemporary scandals.” The so-called “failure” of the sixties to effect real change has become a pessimistic symbol of the improbability of publics to infiltrate and bring-down state apparatuses (government bureaucracy, the war-machine). The 1960s have often been written about as a utopian moment of activism on North American campuses when students’ idealism was naïve and ultimately futile. I want to instead posit that the sixties in Vancouver, especially at the University of British Columbia, was a formative period in which “utopianism” played an important symbolic and productive role in the making of an alternative culture.

The 1960s was not a monolithic period but included within it several ruptures and shifts. For example, postmodern strategies emerged, such as serial poetry and multimedia happenings, as challenges to modernist aesthetic principles including autonomy and the authorial dominance of the artist. By the late 1960s, postmodernism strengthened and structuralism and post-structuralism became academically embedded theoretical discourses. In the last decade, after the wholesale appropriation of postmodernism by academics, the culture industry and mainstream popular culture, postmodernism has, ironically, been emptied as a critical term. Thus,

a critical distance exists between the sixties and now. Consequently, the idealization (or trashing) of the decade is beside the point – what emerges as most salient is the possibility for new approaches to the theorization of paradigm shifts. What have come to be old chestnut characterizations of the sixties, anecdotal and illuminating, are only symptoms of the changes that took place. To gloss over the epistemological shifts that occurred during that period is to negate the significance of the era. In “Periodizing the 60s,” Frederic Jameson argues that there always exist many narratives within a given historical period, each offering diverse responses to the various levels of historical change. Writing history, therefore, is not an exercise in telling it the “way it really happened,” but rather, it is an act of producing a concept of history. In keeping with Jameson’s methodology, I present my thesis as but one narrative among many that could emerge from a study of Vancouver in the 1960s. Specifically, my narrative operates within the context of the west coast where Vancouver is part of a larger cultural and artistic milieu. My narrative also includes the culture and practice of poetry as a significant aspect of the history of the avant-garde in Vancouver. Like Jameson, I accept that there many narrative possibilities...
within a given historical period; however, I recognize that there also exist historical
constants or "regularities." To demonstrate, take an example relevant to the present
study: pop art. London, New York, Los Angeles and, I will claim, Vancouver, each
developed its own brand of pop art in the late 1950s and 1960s. The vernacular of
each city was different: collage using printed material launched pop in London; Los
Angeles artists defined their style using plastics and acrylic paint with a high finish;
and in Vancouver, artists such as Gary Lee-Nova fused hard-edge painting with
popular iconography. Each brand of pop art is specific, derived from the particular
aesthetic and historical practices of that place. However, each manifestation is a
response, never exact, to similar artistic, cultural, and economic conditions. In the
case of pop art, it is a response to post-war consumer culture and traditions of
formalist modernist painting. In weaving my particular narrative, I aim to address the
broader local, regional, and international conditions because it is those conditions that
ultimately define my narrative.

Marshall McLuhan and his work have become almost clichéd in any
discussion of the sixties. "The global village" and "the medium is the message" are
catch phrases alluding to the shrinkage of the world due to the ubiquity of mass media
(television, radio and global telecommunications). However, McLuhan’s dicta are not
simply truisms of communication theory; they also belong to the field of international
critical theory that had been developing in Europe and North America since the
Frankfurt School. His publications, including The Gutenberg Galaxy (1962),

Vancouver. In the second chapter, the visual is the object of critique and the function of vision and
sound is explored by artists such as John Cage and Stan Brakhage. In the third and last chapter, visual
practices in Vancouver are analyzed in relation to open form poetics in poetry, film, and dance.
11 Jameson suggests that narrative possibilities are, in fact, not endless, because across seemingly
unrelated fields the same "regularities" arise. "Periodizing the Sixties," 179.
12 Judith Stamps brings Harold Innis and McLuhan into dialogue with Theodor Adorno and Walter
Benjamin in an attempt to demonstrate that the former were engaged in similar critiques of Western
objectivity as the latter. Also, Stamps argues that the Frankfurt School’s theory of negative dialectics
Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man (1964), and Medium is the Massage (1967), addressed the profound cultural and social implications of the shift from the mechanical to the electric age. Specifically, McLuhan theorized the changing context within which human relations take place, a context which he defined spatially rather than geo-politically. Mass media, McLuhan asserted, led to instantaneous and simultaneous experience. Places were no longer self-contained by their own physicality but were now part of a dynamic, non-visual space. He called it acoustic space, a space in which everyone was linked:

Auditory space has no point of favoured focus...it is not pictorial space, boxed in, but dynamic, always in flux, creating its own dimensions moment by moment. It has no fixed boundaries; it is indifferent to background. The eye focuses, pinpoints, abstracts, locating each object in physical space, against a background; the ear, however, favours sound from any direction.¹³

The disappearance of depth, or one-point perspective (eye space), in favour of multi-directional movement (ear space) characterises the space of global communication. In McLuhan in Space: A Cultural Geography, Richard Cavell argues that McLuhan was a spatial theorist and that acoustic space was at the core of his critique of modernism: “it is precisely McLuhan’s critique of visual space that constitutes his opposition to modern culture, which he understood as seeking to control space through techniques of rational ordering.”¹⁴ Acoustic space is a provocative concept because it conceptualizes changing subjectivity, a notion that McLuhan himself discussed with artists and writers in Vancouver in 1964 at the Festival of the Contemporary Arts and one which was explored by other significant cultural and intellectual figures,

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including Charles Olson and John Cage.

Spatial relations were embodied in new ways – gaps between people, places, spaces, and time zones were narrowing and new relationships between self and other were configured, perhaps the most fateful of which was the “third world.” The processes of de-colonization were concurrent with the media explosion thus making visible national dramas of independence. The independence of Ghana (1957), the assassination of Lumumba in the Congo (1961), the Cuban Revolution (1960), the independence of France’s sub-Saharan colonies (1959), the Battle of Algiers (1957) and the final diplomatic resolution of the Algerian Revolution (1962), and sit-ins in Greensboro, North Carolina (1960) were events which collectively created the third world:

The 60s was, then, the point in which all these “natives” became human beings, and this internally as well as externally: those inner colonized of the first world - “minorities,” marginals, and women - fully as much as its external subjects and official “natives.”

The United States represented the “first world” in the post-war period and was increasingly patriotic and nationalistic. However, with the third world as the “constitutive outside,” new subject positions were created that disrupted the cohesiveness of the national narrative. For example, civil rights groups in the United States supported the liberation of African colonies and condemned American neo-

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15 The story of colonialism and the emergence of the modern nation has been, of course, dwelt upon by twentieth century philosophers, including Jean-Paul Sartre whose text *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960) re-articulated Hegel’s Master/Slave dialectic. Sartre’s analysis included the Look as a transformative operation that constructed not only the Other but also the “I.” While Sartre still retained the existential “I,” the unitary subject was weakening and the self was recognized as being contingent on the Other. This understanding of subjectivity has been brought to its full realization with post-colonial theory which asserts that all subjects are split and constituted by social and psychic forces. Jameson, 187.

16 The “natives” here refer to Sartre’s Preface to Frantz Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth* (1963) where Fanon divides the modern world into men (who have the Word) and natives (who only have use of it). Jameson, 181.
colonial involvement, including the "Green Revolution."\textsuperscript{17} Global politics shaped domestic social and political identities. The public space of the third world created semi-private political space in North America, which came to be embodied in the term "the personal is political."\textsuperscript{18} On the west coast, dissent took a specific form. Anti-war sentiments, specifically anti-Vietnam, were at the heart of cultural and political revolt on university campuses such as Berkeley and also at the University of British Columbia. In San Francisco, beat poets and a young generation of radical writers formed bohemian communities and expressed their rage through poetry and forms of visual art such as dada-inspired collage and assemblage.\textsuperscript{19}

Artistic, national, transnational, and political identities are always constituted by both internal and external and social and psychic forces. On the west coast of North America, a primarily white, middle-class avant-garde was practicing. They were geographically removed from many battlegrounds, for example the agonies of African civil and national wars, the sovereignty struggle in Quebec, and civil rights agitations in the southern United States. Yet, west coast artists and writers were creating their own space of dissent. A major strategy was to construct a space of "freedom." Blaser's "pacific nation" was based not on shared history or nationality but on a deliberate artistic consciousness. However, the question remains: "which groups had a voice?" A transnational, radical avant-garde formed in California and

\textsuperscript{17} The Green Revolution was the name given to interventions into agriculture, primarily by American organizations to address the problem of world hunger. Jameson argues that, in effect, the Green Revolution amounted to neo-colonization where villages that were previously agricultural were being systematically replaced by industrial agriculture, whose main methods were chemical and mechanical implementations. The Green Revolution lead to the destruction of the social and physical fabric of local cultures but provided capital expansion for the United States. Jameson, 184-6.


\textsuperscript{19} For an account of San Francisco bohemian culture, see Richard Cándida Smith, Utopia and Dissent: Art, Poetry and Politics in California (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).
moved up the coast, but they moved straight past the First Nations and past the histories of Asian-North Americans. They were enacting a type of “nostalgia without memory.”\(^\text{20}\) Early Vancouver poets were nostalgic for the greatness of First Nations’ cultures (without remembering the annihilation of Native cultures on the west coast), and several poets and artists sought transcendental understanding in Asia (without remembering the incarceration of Japanese-Canadians and Japanese-Americans during the Second World War).\(^\text{21}\) The artists’ amnesia has been forgotten and what has been celebrated instead are their acts of freedom and conscience. Crow’s history of the 1960s runs the risk of such an eclipse when he suggests that spontaneity led to political action. He argues that the politics of conscience sprang from freedom from the past:

\begin{quote}
[the politics of conscience] moved social radicalism away from the terrain of industry and mass parties toward the realm of conscience, symbolic expression, and spontaneous organizations from below. The dissenting experiments of artists thus found an energizing congruence with the most exciting and successful forms of dissenting politics.\(^\text{22}\)
\end{quote}

On the west coast, artistic and political dissent was made possible, in part, through a sense of freedom and liberation from history. However, unlike Crow, I am suggesting that it is important to understand what was being erased or forgotten in the process of


\(^{21}\) In Chapter One, I address these tensions within the construction of the west coast. For example, Zen Buddhism and Eastern mysticism provided philosophical, aesthetic and practical foundations for west coast poetics, as demonstrated by Blaser’s *The Pacific Nation* of spiritual travellers. However, the Pacific also referred to the Asian Pacific or the Pacific Rim, the economic and political construct that represented both the threat of communism as well as the economic strength of Japan. The United States was at war in Asia between 1945 and 1970, resulting in internal racial and political tension. I will explore the political implications of the west coast as they relate to Canadian and American foreign policies and racial tensions in North America. For a thorough discussion on the formation and history of the Pacific Rim, see Bruce Cummings, “Rimspeak; or, The Discourse of the ‘Pacific Rim,’” in *What is in a Rim? Critical Perspectives on the Pacific Region Idea*, ed. Arif Dirlik (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 1998), 53-72.

\(^{22}\) Crow, 11.
creating a space of freedom.

Peter Plagens asserts that the west coast was constructed through a deliberate plotting of artists and curators. In Vancouver, Alvin Balkind of the Fine Arts Gallery at the University of British Columbia, Warren Tallman, professor of English, and Blaser, were actively involved in the construction of the west coast. I am asking: was its formation a radical expression of conscience? The politics of conscience was an avant-garde gesture that, like pop art and happenings and assemblage, sought to integrate art and life. For Crow, it meant a co-habitation of art and politics. Before examining the particularity of the west coast situation, it is first necessary, at least briefly, to focus on the problems of the avant-garde. The complexity of the term avant-garde as it is used in the context of mid-century art production has been dealt with at length by writers associated with *October* magazine. The text with which I am most concerned is Hal Foster's *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the end of the Century*, since it offers both a sound critique of the theory of the avant-garde and a new model for analyzing both the historical and contemporary avant-garde.

Writing against and in dialogue with Peter Bürger’s 1974 seminal text *Theory of the Avant-Garde* and Benjamin Buchloh’s various responses to it, Foster examines the nature of the avant-garde and posits that it can be understood as a series of “returns” or “deferred actions.” This is most clearly understood in the case of the neo-avant-garde, defined by Foster as:

23 Peter Plagens argues that the flowering of the West Coast scene was “deliberately and benevolently plotted by curators, writers and scholastics eminently familiar with the mainstream model.” California-based contributor to *Artforum*, Plagens was one of the first critics to identify the specificity of the west coast art scene. *Sunshine Muse: Contemporary Art on the West Coast* (New York: Praeger, 1974), 20.

a loose grouping of North American and Western European artists of the 1950s and 1960s who reprised such avant-garde devices of the 1920s and 1930s as collage and assemblage, the readymade and the grid, monochrome painting and constructed sculpture. No rule governs the return of these devices: no one instance is strictly revisionist, radical, or compulsive.  

My thesis focuses on the artistic reprises by the west coast avant-garde, specifically returns to dada forms of collage, assemblage, the readymade, and the aesthetics of chance. In 1960, when San Francisco artist Bruce Conner juxtaposed found objects in his assemblage *Child*, or in 1966, when Vancouver artist Michael Morris disrupted pure opticality with a thought bubble in *The Problem of Nothing*, aesthetic returns were enacted. Such returns to avant-garde modes (readymade, monochrome painting) are complex, argues Foster, and symbolize the ambivalent relationship between the neo-avant-garde and the historical avant-garde.

According to Bürger, despite its self-reflexivity about the context and institutions of art, the historical avant-garde (dada, constructivism, surrealism) failed, not in terms of aesthetic challenges but in terms of effecting radical political change through the destruction of bourgeois autonomy. The value of the avant-garde has

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26 The aesthetic returns of the 1960s were paralleled in philosophical returns in the late 1960s, namely re-readings of Marx and Freud by Louis Althusser and Jacques Lacan, respectively. Althusser and Lacan were both “taking stock” of the major cultural and critical theories of the century: Marxism and psychoanalysis. Both returns enunciate the inclusion of a new scientism in philosophy, namely the discovery of the Symbolic and the primacy of Language and both returns resist humanist interpretations. Althusser’s reading of Marx, moving away from Sartrean interpretations, operated at the structural level; that is, he addressed the cultural dimension of Marx’s modes of production, specifically aspects of ideology and power. Ideology, in Althusser’s understanding, permeated not just class or economic relations, but also the social forces shaping subjectivity, including family and education. Lacan re-read Freud using contemporary linguistic theory to reveal what was implicit in Freud’s work. Specifically, by linking Freud’s psychoanalytic theory to semiotics, Lacan sought to explain the Freudian unconscious through analyzing processes of language. Jameson refers to these returns as “a withering away of philosophy” because philosophy was replaced by a material practice called “theory”; that is, the history of ideas was no longer conceived of as a progression of philosophical traditions written by individual auteurs, but rather as a constellation of texts that build on, repudiate, and struggle against each other. See Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Allen Lane, 1969); and “Ideology and State Apparatuses,” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: New Books, 1971), 123-73. For Lacan’s interpretations of Freud, see Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, Paris: Editions du Seuils, 1966 or *Écrits*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977). For an understanding of Lacanian semiotics, see Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, eds. Charles Bally et. al. (New York and Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 1966).
since been questioned. To be sure, the avant-garde as a cultural construction has been plagued by theoretical problems. Ironically, avant-garde production has embodied notions that have in fact protected the bourgeois autonomy of art: “the presumption of originality, the ideology of progress, the elitist hermeticism, the historical exclusivity, and the appropriation by the culture industry.” Bürger understands the neo-avant-garde as merely repeating the strategies of the historical avant-garde to produce politically impotent pastiches, thereby negating the meaning of the avant-garde. However, Foster argues that the neo-avant-garde represents a rich area for art historical understanding. In the face of post-war conditions, artists in the 1960s looked to radical strategies of the past but applied them to contemporary artistic and political concerns. In Vancouver, the tradition of European landscape painting was seen by emerging artists as an outdated and empty form of colonial expression that needed to be made obsolete, a goal that could be achieved using American neo-dada strategies.

Foster argues that Bürger’s text echoes Marx’s fatalist declaration that “all great events of world history occur twice, the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce.” For Foster, a Marxist conception that understands history in terms of evolution and progression and as events that are determined by before and after and cause and effect, results in historicism. Foster is particularly alarmed by the misconception that history is punctual and final; in other words, that the significance of an event is fully realized in its moment of occurrence – its production, reception and meaning.

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27 Foster, 5.

28 Bürger asserts that a fundamental strategy of the avant-garde is the “refusal to create meaning” and that it does so through shock and negation. The readymade (Duchamp’s dada symbol for the de-reification of art), for example, assaults the viewer’s division between art and life and thus challenges the contexts and institutions framing the production and reception of art. Bürger asserts that the neo-avant-garde, in fact, institutionalizes the avant-garde and therefore negates its meaning. Bürger, 52-8.
conflated in that moment. The neo-avant-garde offers a site of analysis that, because of its very nature of returns and reprisals, can puncture the historicism that dominates art historical writing.

The artistic returns of the 1950s and 1960s were not superficial repetitions of the historical avant-garde. Rather, I will argue that the returns themselves are indicative of the processes of historical signification. That is, the avant-garde is not to be read as immediate transgression, as Bürger would have it, but rather as a "continual process of protension and retension." Specifically, the returns of the 1960s can be conceptualized in the Freudian model of repression. Rather than a straight understanding of artistic movements as origin, reception, and repetition (in that order), the Freudian model makes complex the temporal and causal dimensions of avant-garde activities. Put simply, a trauma or rupture is repressed and only registered through another event, or deferred action. Lacan re-read Freud in terms of the Symbolic, or the realm of language. In the Symbolic, subjectivity is constituted in language through a process of signification; each idea or thing is signified by a word (signifier). A trauma is an event that punctures the Symbolic realm, that is, it is part of the Real (outside of language) and therefore cannot immediately be resolved by the Symbolic – it cannot be signified in language because there are no words for it; it is repressed. However, through a series of repetitions, and only through repetition, the

29 Foster, 5-8. Foster asserts that historicism still pervades most art historical writing and that is has dominated in 20th century criticism, as in the work by Clement Greenberg and Alfred Barr.
30 Foster's critique aims to advance the following claims of the neo-avant-garde: "(1) the institution of art is grasped as such not with the historical avant-garde but with the neo-avant-garde; (2) the neo-avant-garde at its best addresses this institution with a creative analysis at once specific and deconstructive (not a nihilistic attack at once abstract and anarchistic, as often with the historical avant-garde); and (3) rather than cancel the historical avant-garde, the neo-avant-garde enacts its project for the first time - a first time that, again, is theoretically endless." Foster, 20.
31 Ibid., 29.
32 Benjamin Buchloh, "Primary Colours for the Second Time: A Paradigm Repetition of the Neo-Avant-Garde," October 37, Summer 1986, 41-52. Buchloh articulated the Freudian reading of the avant-garde: "a model of repetition that might better describe this relationship is the Freudian concept of repetition that originates in repression and disavowal," 43.
event is altered and thus, structured in language.\textsuperscript{33}

The avant-garde can be understood as being constituted in a similar manner, as "a complex relay of anticipated futures and reconstructed pasts."\textsuperscript{34} The deferred action of the avant-garde is relevant to the present thesis. The west coast was imagined as a \textit{tabula rasa} by figures such as Balkind and Blaser, where new identities and associations could be created. Collage, assemblage, and pop emerged in this space of repression and through a reprise of rhetorical devices, the disruptive nature of the avant-garde was restored, acted-out, and re-formulated. Seen in this sense, the avant-garde is a projection of the future – its disruption only realized when a future action restores it. In the mid 1960s, Vancouver artists such as Gary Lee-Nova and Iain Baxter used collage and readymades as returns to dada and surrealism. At the end of the 1960s, when Vancouver artists Jeff Wall and Ian Wallace took up language and conceptual practices, a similar process of disruption and restoration was enacted.\textsuperscript{35} In this sense, there were two avant-garde movements in the sixties in Vancouver. The first was a return to the historical avant-garde and the second, a critique of that return.

Until recently, New York has represented the centre of post-war art, a position that was secured in the 1950s and 1960s by art critics such as Clement Greenberg. Against avant-garde desires to fuse art and life, Greenberg wanted to keep art, specifically abstract painting and sculpture, in the realm of pure aesthetics. Grounding


\textsuperscript{34} Foster, 29.

\textsuperscript{35} To further demonstrate the continuous and repetitive nature of the avant-garde, Foster also suggests that there were two neo-avant-gardes. The first, in the 1950s, reprised dadaist devices, specifically collage and happenings (Robert Rauschenberg and Allan Kaprow), in effect, institutionalizing the historical avant-garde and thereby provoking the second incarnation of the neo-avant-garde in the 1960s. Artists such as Daniel Buren and Marcel Broodthaers critiqued both the process of institutionalization and the previous avant-garde formations. Foster, 21-4.
himself in Kantian notions of the objectivity of taste and judgment, Greenberg outlined the requirements for successful painting: it had to be self-referential and self-critical, a condition attained through the compositional elements of flatness, colour, and opticality.\textsuperscript{36} By the mid-1960s, after twenty years of Greenberg’s authorial dominance, art critics and artists began to challenge the tenets of his formalist criticism that they believed could no longer adequately address “new art.”\textsuperscript{37} A wide range of modernist and avant-garde expressions evidenced the breakdown of formalist modernism from Robert Rauschenberg’s combine paintings to Jasper Johns’ iconic flag paintings to Donald Judd’s “specific objects” and Sol le Witt’s “Sentences on Conceptual Art.” The avant-garde in New York emerged within an already-established critical network of writers and institutions, and, despite the break-down of Greenberg’s formalism, New York remained the artistic centre.

The avant-garde on the west coast was not shaped in opposition to Greenbergian formalism.\textsuperscript{38} The “returns” were of a different nature. For example, the appropriation of assemblage was not so much a rejection of Greenberg’s formalism as much as a strategy to challenge local traditions of landscape painting. The west coast was a different avant-garde formation altogether, one that was neither oblivious to, nor derivative of, New York modernisms. Despite the hegemony of New York


\textsuperscript{38} Avant-garde art in Vancouver was not directly engaged with Greenbergian criticism. However, as Caroline Jones points out, the “Greenberg effect” was nonetheless active on the west coast. Hard-edge painting, for example, demonstrated a preoccupation for the material aspects of painting and therefore remained engaged with formalist principles even if they were disrupted by illusion and extra-visual references. For a discussion of the “Greenberg effect,” see Caroline A. Jones, \textit{Eyesight Alone: Clement Greenberg’s Modernism and the Bureaucratization of the Senses} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), xix-xxv.
criticism, *Artforum* was founded in San Francisco in 1962, re-located to Los Angeles in 1965, and ultimately moved to New York in 1967. The physical and textual moves of *Artforum* alone reveal the complexity of cultural and theoretical relationship between California and New York. While many critics remained invested in one side or the other of Greenberg’s aesthetic battle, new critical voices emerged to produce new methodologies with which to analyze art that fell outside of the Greenbergian paradigm, such as pop and assemblage.

The west coast was the vision of the avant-garde that practiced there. As with any geo-political construction, it is more mythic than actual, more imagined than real. Writing on the history of Vancouver art, curator and art historian Scott Watson identifies the “West Coast Thing” as a major factor in the city’s emergence as an art centre, stating that “the counter-culture of consciousness-raising, Tibetan Buddhism, faux agrarianism, wilderness worship, LSD, and sexual exploration” were part of Vancouver’s cultural landscape and connected it to California’s counterculture. But how and why did that “West Coast Thing” form?

The cross-fertilization of poetry and visual art is the most distinctive aspect of the west coast avant-garde, the germ of which was the San Francisco Renaissance of the 1950s. Black Mountain poets Robert Duncan and Robert Creeley moved to San Francisco, bringing their poetics with them. Duncan set up the Ubu Gallery (1952)

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39 The first five years of *Artforum* were focused on the west coast even though there was increasing contribution from New York critics. *Artforum* was the most widely read art journal on the west coast, both before and after its move to New York. For a chronology of the journal’s publications, as well as a summary of its main theoretical debates including the discourses around formalism, see Amy Newman, *Challenging Art: Artforum 1962-74* (New York: Soho Press, 2000).

40 In Chapter Three, I will explore these new critical methodologies, specifically pragmatism. Critics such as Barbara Rose and Max Kozloff looked to the aesthetic principles of John Cage for richer interpretations of avant-garde production. See Harrison, 11-27.


42 Black Mountain College in North Carolina was a major site of American radical and experimental
and the Six Gallery (1954) where Allen Ginsberg read his legendary beat poem *Howl* in 1955. Beat writers such as W.S. Burroughs, Jack Kerouac, Wallace Berman, and Allen Ginsberg (‘beat’ referring to the dissonance and rhythm of music, especially bebop and free-form jazz) sought freedom from censorship and conservatism and raged against post-war consumerism, bourgeois values, sexual oppression, and war. The United States was stabilizing as a world power and embarking on programs of militarization, corporatization, and nationalism. Beat culture posed a threat to “straight” America and symbolized all that was antithetical to post-war middle class values. As one writer in *Life* magazine ranted:

> [beat writers] are talkers, loafers, passive little con-men, lonely eccentrics, mom-haters, cop-haters, exhibitionists with abused smiles and second mortgages on a bongo drum - writers who cannot write, painters who cannot paint.\(^4^4\)

On the west coast, the history of beat culture and radical poetics took a specific form, particularly in San Francisco with experimental jazz and poetry. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, writers formed communal groups that gathered informally to discuss art and ideas. Conscientious objectors to World War II were interned in CO camps in Oregon. Writers who had been interned moved to San Francisco upon their release and brought their dissenting politics to join forces with local poets such as Robert Duncan, Kenneth Rexroth, Philip Lamantia, Gary Snyder, Michael McClure, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti – poets who would later come to Vancouver to participate in the 1963 Poetry Conference and in the annual Festival of the Contemporary Arts.\(^4^5\)

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\(^{45}\) Peters, 203.
Based on the poetics of Charles Olson, these poets explored linguistics, spirituality, and philosophy through sound and non-narrative structure.\textsuperscript{46} Ferlinghetti opened City Lights Bookstore in 1953 and City Lights Publications in 1955 thus establishing San Francisco as a radical and truly independent literary centre.\textsuperscript{47}

In 1963, the University of British Columbia hosted the Vancouver Poetry Conference, the culmination of a three-year frenzy of poetic activity on the west coast.\textsuperscript{48} The San Francisco Renaissance had traveled and taken hold in Vancouver.\textsuperscript{49} This was only the beginning: Creeley, Duncan, Ginsberg, Spicer, Persky, and Blaser all taught in Vancouver during the 1960s. In 1961, the first Festival of the Contemporary Arts took place on the university campus. It was to be an annual event for the next decade – a multi-disciplinary festival that featured experimental film, visual art, dance, and music produced on the west coast. In 1967, when Blaser wrote \textit{The Pacific Nation} from Vancouver, he was calling on an imagined community of writers, artists, and “travellers.” Blaser was articulating the nation that he and his

\textsuperscript{46} Of particular significance was Olson’s \textit{Projective Verse} in \textit{Selected Writings of Charles Olson}, ed. Robert Creeley (New York: New Directions, 1966), which outlined a model for process-oriented, kinetic poetry. Alfred North Whitehead was also important to San Francisco poets, specifically his theory process philosophy as written in \textit{Process and Reality} (New York: Macmillan, 1929).

\textsuperscript{47} For histories of the beat scene in Los Angeles and San Francisco, see \textit{Reading California: Art, Image, and Identity, 1900-2000}, eds. Stephanie Barron, Sheri Bernstein, and Ilene Susan Fort (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2000).

\textsuperscript{48} In 1961, Warren Tallman, professor of English at the University of British Columbia, assigned his poetry class a reading which would begin their engagement with the San Francisco Renaissance and with American modernism: \textit{New American Poetry: 1945-1960}, ed. Donald Allen (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1960). The anthology contained works from five distinct groups: Black Mountain, San Francisco Renaissance, beat poets, New York poets, and emerging poets. In the preface, editor Donald Allen, friend and collaborator with Tallman, wrote that the work of these poets shared a common trait, “a total rejection of all those qualities typical of academic verse...they are our avant-garde” (xi). Of the five groups, four were practicing on the west coast: Creeley and Duncan of the Black Mountain poets; Jack Spicer, Robin Blaser, and Philip Lamantia of the San Francisco Renaissance; Ginsberg and Kerouac of the beats; and Philip Whalen, Gary Snyder, and Michael McClure of the emerging poets. Each of these poets read and produced on the west coast and each was a significant participant in the Vancouver poetry scene.

\textsuperscript{49} Robert Duncan was a catalyst for both the formation for the San Francisco Renaissance and the Vancouver poetry movement. His treatise entitled “The Homosexual in Society,” published in \textit{The Kenyon Review} in 1944, articulated a central axis of both movements. In San Francisco and Vancouver, the politics of gay sexuality and the freedom of sexual expression were fundamental aspects of the practice and culture of poetry. Although I do not directly address the specificity of these politics and discourses in this thesis, they will warrant a close critical analysis in a future study.
colleagues inhabited: a nation without borders, without nationality, and without politics.

The "nation" is a social, political, and psychic force that has been the discursive site of fundamental battles of modernity and postmodernity. At its most basic level, the nation has been understood in terms of "territorialization"; the process by which national identity becomes contingent on territorial borders that define and contain the nation. The mental space of the nation, what Benedict Anderson calls the "imagined community," contains symbols of shared national identity such as hospitals, newspapers, media, and schools. The imagined community of the nation, in addition to sharing symbolic space, also shares time. Citizens imagine themselves to be linked not only symbolically, but also temporally. Yesterday, today, and tomorrow—citizens were, are, and will be united in the national plot. However, in everyday practices of culture, national identity is also contested through personal rituals of ethnicity, religion, and gender, to name a few. The narrative of the nation, then, slips between calendrical time and a type of non-narrative time that is characterized by personal performances of identity in the present.\(^50\) (This temporal slippage of the nation is similar to the temporal movements of the avant-garde.) National identity, therefore, is constituted in between an imagined collective and the personal performance of everyday rituals.\(^51\) In conceptualizing the cultural formation of the west coast, I understand the region as a kind of nation in which its artists identify with both the national narratives of the United States and Canada but more intimately with

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their specific local cultural practices such as radical poetry.

Eric Hobsbawm identifies the 19th century as the birth of the modern nation within the context of colonial migration and expansion.\textsuperscript{52} The nation in the 1960s, however, was a changed construct. The invention of the third world, de-colonization, neo-colonization, the compression of the world through media, and capital expansion on a larger scale, were all forces acting upon the construction of the nation. To be sure, the process of globalization was quickening and intensifying. Global interconnectivity had previously been almost imperceptible. Now it was becoming audible. The modern nation was splintering, revealing temporal and spatial disjunctures between the space of the first and third worlds, between the official national narrative and the everyday, and between the homogeneity of the nation and the politics of difference. Henri Lefebvre’s 1973 \textit{Production of Space} was a response, in part, to the new metaphorical dimensions that space acquired in the 1960s. His most fundamental claim was that:

> all social relations, whether they are linked to class, family, community, market, or state power, remain abstract and ungrounded until they are specifically spatialized, that is, made into material and symbolic spatial relations.”\textsuperscript{53}

Lefebvre’s premise also applies to the west coast – what makes it a distinct ‘place’ is not its shared geography, topography, artistic continuities, and so forth, but rather that there exists within it everyday patterns of social and psychic relations that delimit the concept of the west coast.

In the last century of globalization, nations have become increasingly conceptual as communities are imagined less through households, towns, cities, and countries and more through symbolic spatial relations (TV, radio,

\textsuperscript{52} Bhabha, 291.
\textsuperscript{53} Soja, 9.
Deterritorialization, the process of weakening attachments to place, although more far-reaching in the 21st century, was palpable in the 1960s. As Edward Soja explains, with de-territorialization there is also re-territorialization, an inverse process of re-identifying with a new set of spatialized relations that are not necessarily part of the traditional nation (diasporic communities are the ultimate examples of re-territorialization). Re-territorialization works to restructure the relationship between space, knowledge, and power, "creating new forms and combinations of social spatiality and territorial identity that, if not actually replacing the old, are producing human geographies that are significantly different and more complex." The formation of the west coast represented, in part, a type of re-territorialization in the context of (North) American Cold War politics. Fractured political identities in the United States and the actual movement of bodies into Canada (draft-dodging and exile), which would otherwise be isolated and abstract relations, became spatialized in the idea of the "west coast."

Similar to Foster, who uses Lacanian psychoanalysis to open up understandings of avant-garde formations, Bhabha uses linguistic processes to articulate new understandings of nationhood. In DissemiNation: time, narrative, and the margins of the modern nation, Bhabha argues that the ambivalence of language is paralleled in the ambivalence of the nation. Just as language is both internal and

54 Extending Anderson's "imagined community," Arjun Appadurai produces a vocabulary for analyzing the "imagined worlds" in globalization. Specifically, Appadurai argues for the importance of locality in globalization and asserts that local formations, cultures, and practices are always in tension with global flows of capital, information, ideologies and images. Appadurai, 27-47.
55 Soja, 152. The effects of de-territorialization form the basis for Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's rhizomatic theory of culture in A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987). In recent scholarship, Vancouver has been referred to as a "nodal point in the rhizomatic structure of the American West Coast." Intertidal, 9. While acknowledging Vancouver as a locality within this structure, it is also seen as a "generic city" or "no place." Soja, among others, take a more positive understanding of spatial dynamics by using the concept of re-territorialization. Rather than re-affirming "no places," re-territorialization re-creates alternative, new, post-national, and postmodern understandings of place.
external, national identity is similarly coming from both the “outside” (state ideology) as well as the “inside” (agency of the self). This splitting of the national subject is addressed in two “tenses” of the nation, the pedagogical and the performative. Put simply, the pedagogical tense refers to Anderson’s official narrative of the nation, while the performative refers to an enunciation of identity that marks difference. Where the pedagogical represents a historical present in which the nation announces itself, the performative intervenes as a voice of the Other from the outside – its time is a simultaneous gap in the pedagogical present. Bhabha argues that it is precisely in this double-time of the pedagogical (narrative authority) and performative (agency of a people) that cultural liminality within the nation is located:

Counter-narratives of the nation that continually evoke and erase its totalising boundaries - both actual and conceptual - disturb those ideological manoeuvres through which “imagined communities” are given essentialist identities. For the political unity of the nation consists in a continual displacement of its irredeemably plural modern space, bounded by different, even hostile nations, into a signifying space that is archaic and mythic.

I am arguing that the west coast be understood as a counter-narrative to both the official narratives of the United States and Canada. Contained within both nations, its members, including Balkind and Blaser and emerging avant-garde artists, did not act out either national narratives but enunciated their own difference.

The official narrative of the post-war United States was steeped in patriotism that was grounded in anti-communism. In 1960, J. Edgar Hoover issued the warning that “America’s three greatest enemies were communists, eggheads and beatniks.”

In the arts, New York abstract expressionism was appropriated by the culture industry to represent “true” American art. Promoted internationally as embodying the liberty

57 Ibid., 300.
58 Peters, 209.
and strength of the American democratic nation, abstraction was said to demonstrate freedom and boldness, implied is its opposition to stultified communist art such as social realism.\textsuperscript{59} Art production was not exempt from politicization. On the west coast in the 1950s, the romantic landscape and nature painters that made up the \textit{Ecole du Pacifique} represented an aesthetic alternative to the New York School but still operated within the expressionistic mode.\textsuperscript{60} However, in the 1960s, the west coast re-defined itself as the "pacific nation"; thus, claiming an entirely new status as a politically, culturally, and philosophically distinct region.

The citizens of Blaser's "pacific nation" were bound by shared cultural practices.\textsuperscript{61} The west coast was a transnational counter-narrative formation that was ultimately manifested through common identification with particular values. As already mentioned, one of the cultural or social values was the practice of poetry. In the history of modernity, the writing of poetry has represented what Jameson calls, "a specialized and elite phenomenon."\textsuperscript{62} Beginning with Baudelaire, the poet of modern life \textit{par excellence}, avant-garde writers have used poetry to transgress artistic, political and cultural boundaries. In writing on contemporary avant-garde poetry in Vancouver, Stephen Collis posits that Blaser's \textit{The Pacific Nation} was a radical political idea inextricably linked to the practice of radical poetry:

"poetry is an inside job - an operation performed from within the vault"

\textsuperscript{59} As Serge Guilbaut argues in \textit{How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War} (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1983), abstract expressionism was not exempt from cold war politics despite Greenberg's claims to the contrary.

\textsuperscript{60} Plagens, 46-7.

\textsuperscript{61} Chantal Mouffe defines citizenship in a political community as people who "might be engaged in many different purposive enterprises and with differing conceptions of the good...what binds them together is their common recognition of a set of ethico-political values." Chantal Mouffe, "Democratic Citizenship and the Political Community," in \textit{Dimensions of Radical Democracy: Pluralism, Citizenship, Community}, ed. Chantal Mouffe (London: Verso, 1992), 235. I am conceptualizing the west coast as a community whose citizens were diverse in race, class, and sexuality but who were bound by specific artistic and political practices. Radical poetics, the rejection of romantic painting, anti-Vietnam activism, and an affinity and romanticization of the Asian Pacific are specific common practices of west coast artists.

\textsuperscript{62} Jameson, 179.
of language - so that, if it’s doing its job, it can’t help but destabilize and defamiliarize and draw the curtain covering the ideological imperatives that are an unavoidable aspect of language.63

The ideological imperatives of language that Collis is referring to are the same ambivalent tendencies that Bhabha understands as critical to the formation of counter-narratives of the nation, namely the pedagogical and the performative tenses. In this sense, it is no wonder that poetry is an aspect of so much political and revolutionary cultural production. However, Collis considers radical poetry within a much smaller context – the university setting. Similarly, I will address how avant-garde poetry that was both creative and critical operated within the institutional arena of the university. Specifically, I will examine the relationship between the academy and utopia and consider not just university production, but also collaborative practices that took place in neighbourhoods of Vancouver, such as multimedia galleries and studios. A site for the elite practice of poetry and a player in the construction of the counter-narrative of the west coast, Vancouver offers itself an ideal “laboratory situation” in which to observe the social, political, and cultural conditions of the period.

Vancouver art history of the 1960s, while acknowledging the city’s significant poetry movement, has not critically investigated the intimate relationship between art and poetry. Similarly, Vancouver’s position on the west coast circuit has been under-theorized, making the history of Vancouver art seem somewhat insular and one-dimensional. It has been structured around one particularly problematic premise: that Vancouver visual avant-garde practices occurred in the late 1960s as a result of an infusion of New York-based conceptually-oriented artists such as Dan Graham and Robert Smithson.64

64 See, for example, Bart de Baere and Dieter Roelstraete, “Introducing Intertidal,” in Intertidal, 11.
It is here that my thesis marks an intervention into Vancouver art history. First, I want to challenge the idea that the visual avant-garde began in the late sixties and instead argue for its emergence in the early 1960s. Second, I want to challenge the reason given for its later emergence, namely, what has been termed the “Dan Graham/Robert Smithson effect.” Smithson’s visit to Vancouver and to the University of British Columbia in 1969 has been mythologized as an “age-defining, inaugural moment.” In this moment, as it goes, critical conceptual practices landed on Vancouver’s shores and thus initiated the avant-garde.

Scott Watson’s substantial research and significant critical writing on early practices in Vancouver, including figurative painting of the 1940s, modern art and design in the 1950s, and emergent avant-garde practices in the 1960s, have contributed substantially to the discipline. Watson’s scholarship in the latter area has aided in the production of the “Graham/Smithson effect.” In “Discovering the Defeatured Landscape,” Watson’s history of the Vancouver avant-garde starts in 1967 with minimal works by Ian Wallace and Jeff Wall, pieces he claims that, while engaged with the ideas of Donald Judd and Carl Andre, were too detached (too Zen) and lacked theoretical tensions. For Watson, Vancouver’s first avant-garde work was produced in 1969 with Wall’s *Landscape Manual* and the collaborative *Free*

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65 I am challenging the suggestion put forth by Ian Wallace in “The Frontier of the Avant-garde,” in *Inter tidal*, 53. Wallace is a visual artist who practiced in Vancouver in the sixties and is also a member of the “Vancouver School” that formed in the 1980s. In my opinion, he over-emphasizes the significance of Dan Graham and Robert Smithson to Vancouver avant-gardism at the expense of earlier catalysts, despite his own 1960s practice that was very much part of the west coast scene.

66 Bart de Baere and Dieter Roelstraete, “Introducing Inter tidal,” *Inter tidal*, 11. Dan Graham’s *Homes For America* and Smithson’s *A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey* are examples of the works that are said to have been the most significant for Vancouver artists.


Media Bulletin, at the time that these artists became critically engaged with Graham and Smithson.

I want to re-investigate this particular history at several levels. On a broad level, a history that ignores local practices and cultural formations is, in effect, a master narrative that perpetuates models of cultural dominance. Furthermore, a history that identifies one event as the cause of a subsequent condition is plagued by historicism. It promotes a myth of creation and subsequently denies the possibility for the temporal and spatial disjunctures that are enacted by both avant-garde and transnational formations.

In “Urban Renewal: Ghost Traps, Collage, Condos, and Squats – Vancouver Art in the Sixties,” Watson acknowledges the “West Coast Thing” but does not address how or why it was formed. For example, Watson’s analysis of Vancouver vanguard filmmaker, Sam Perry does not reveal the extent to which the role of Californian poetic practices informed early Vancouver avant-garde production. Inspired by American filmmaker Stan Brakhage and grounded in the aesthetics of Charles Olson, Perry’s film and poetic practices exemplify the connection between art and poetry on the west coast.

The “West Coast Thing” seems to represent the mainstream hippie counterculture of the late sixties when the oppositional and radical intentions of the beats had been replaced by popular alternative practices of youth culture. However, I am arguing that the early and mid-1960s in Vancouver had not yet seen that transformation of the beat culture into the “West Coast Thing.” The west coast that is the context for my study formed a decade earlier in the milieu of experimental and

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radical poetry.\textsuperscript{70} I will substantially broaden the west coast to include the aesthetics of
beat poetry and assemblage; aesthetics that were foundational to artists such as Sam Perry and that were consistently present and alive in Vancouver throughout the 1960s.

I will further argue that in 1969, when Jeff Wall, Ian Wallace, and Duane Lunden produced their photographic and language art in \textit{Free Media Bulletin}, it was not as a result of the influence of New York conceptual artists. Rather, the broadside was an extension of the west coast avant-garde, incorporating the poetic practices of the San Francisco Renaissance and Los Angeles. Including radical texts by contemporary and historical avant-garde figures such as Marcel Duchamp, Alexander Trocchi, Antonin Artaud, and W.S. Burroughs, \textit{Free Media Bulletin} was a continuation of the return to dada, specifically explorations of the readymade. Of particular significance in Vancouver was the cross-fertilization of art and poetry, especially at the University of British Columbia. Starting in 1961 with \textit{Tish} poetics, the investigation into language and the desire to free poetry from narrative limitations informed the philosophical and aesthetic foundations of works such as \textit{Free Media Bulletin}.\textsuperscript{71}

\textsuperscript{70} The west coast has been used as a theoretical and geo-political construct with which to study cultural production in several exhibitions, including: \textit{Baja to Vancouver: the West Coast and contemporary art}, Ralph Rugoff and Matthew Higgs, curators (San Francisco: CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, 2003); \textit{West Coast Residential: The Modern and the Contemporary}, Charles H. Scott Gallery, Vancouver, June, 2003; and, \textit{Rezoning: Collage and Assemblage}, bill bissett, George Herms, Jess, Al Neil (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1989).

\textsuperscript{71} Reid Shier notes the continuing cross-disciplinary interaction between writers and artists in Vancouver, specifically between the Kootenay School of Writing and the Vancouver School. He dates the interaction between artists and poets back to Robert Creeley and Roy Kiyooka in the early 1960s, supporting my argument of a much earlier avant-garde formation. "Buddies, Pals," \textit{Intertidal}, 83.
CHAPTER ONE

"Against History Stands Poetry:"¹
Vancouver, American Modernism, and the Formation of the West Coast

Tuesday Night

When the city huddles down
to sleep - and round
the corners lights on poles
tremble tighter patterns out and down
the rolling streets in pairs and strings
in ski-jump movement to the sea -

I know
where I am -

out west in the city -
Point Grey pointing west in the middle
of the night of rest extending to the sea -
hoving nightly away from the middle
of the city held together by bridges
in a surface-tension-taut-catching bend -

of bridge
pinioned Vancouver

where I know where I am -
on the arcing point reaching westward
bulge of high-dry-happy-dare hysterical
daytime Vancouver - subdued nightly -
down and huddled - hoving westward light -

- George Bowering ²

¹ Richard Cándida Smith analyzes the poetry movement in California after World War II and argues that poetry was a social movement that operated in opposition to history and can be “understood as any meaning-finding reflection on experience.” Utopia and Dissent: Art, Poetry and Politics in California (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), xix.
Vancouver's shift from a colonial outpost to a modernist utopia, from a backwater to a metropolis, from an artistic periphery to a cultural centre was initiated by key figures and sustained through enduring collaborations and organizations. These individuals and activities not only breathed life into Vancouver but also connected Vancouver in a profound and vital way to the west coast circuit and in particular, to the cities of San Francisco and Los Angeles. Warren Tallman, B.C. Binning, and Alvin Balkind were crucial early players in the emergence of Vancouver's cultural presence in North America, each responsible for conceptualizing and establishing foundational aspects of art practice in Vancouver.

In this chapter, I will analyze Tallman's role in early Vancouver cultural production and the formation of the west coast. Tallman, Seattle-born poet, left the University of Berkeley in 1956 to come to the English Department at the University of British Columbia. Tallman instigated and maintained a profound cultural and artistic connection between Vancouver and California. Through teaching and administrating intellectual exchanges, he secured a place for American avant-garde poetry within the University of British Columbia. He also enabled American poets and dissidents including Robert Duncan, Robert Creeley, Robin Blaser, and Jack Spicer to practice in British Columbia. Thus, he actively enlarged the west coast and helped to produce the idea of the "pacific nation," a concept that, in order to be a legitimate transnational counter-narrative, needed Vancouver and Canada as part of its make-up. Through Tallman, the San Francisco Renaissance poets carried their poetics and aesthetics up the coast and ultimately found a forum at the University of British Columbia. Local poets and artists strongly identified with the American modernists who, transplanted in Canada in a traditional institution no less, catalyzed several local vanguard activities, the earliest being the poetry group Tish.
I will analyze some of the first articulations of avant-garde poetic practice in Vancouver, practices that would act as the support for the intense period of visual art production that would follow several years later. Specifically, I will examine the role of poetry in the formation of the Vancouver avant-garde as it would come to cross-fertilize with visual art. Founded in 1961, Tish (a movement and a poetry newsletter) was an experimental, transnational creative project. Like Vancouver itself, it was porous, absorbing and circulating ideas, forms, and new voices. Tish and Vancouver poetic activity worked to ground Vancouver in a sense of place, a place that was understood as part of the west coast. Poetry in Vancouver was fundamentally conceived of as existing in exchange with American artistic figures in cross-border dialogues. However, these dialogues did not function to mark out either national borders or artistic boundaries. Rather, the dialogues cut through borders to dissolve national designations and to engage in transnational discourses of regional identity, political affiliations, and personal connections. Similarly, the dialogues did not divide artistic practice into separate spheres of production. The ‘disciplines’ of poetry, dance, film, and visual art were not understood to be in isolation; they were crucially connected by their shared conceptions, practitioners, and audiences.

3 Vancouver’s modernist avant-garde practices did not start in the 1960s. In the 1950s, there was a small group of local architects, designers and artists who were exploring principles of modernism, especially in design. B.C. Binning actively explored international modernism in the 1940s and 1950s and carried the project forward into the 1960s at the University of British Columbia. The Art in Living Group also worked on social utopias in design, see Scott Watson, “Art in the Fifties: Design, Leisure, and Painting in the Age of Anxiety,” in Vancouver: Art and Artists, 1931-1983 (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1983), 72-101.

4 The avant-garde formation that I am identifying here is one that was part of a larger context than just Vancouver, namely, the west coast. It was in dialogue with internationally emerging art practices: kinetic art, happenings, hard-edge and post-painterly abstraction, and language art. The “neo-avant-garde” that Hal Foster analyzes in detail is what I am examining in the context of the west coast, an avant-garde that emerged differently than that of New York. For example, where minimal and conceptual practices in New York were in large part a response to Greenbergian formalism, on the west coast Greenberg’s currency was far less prominent. Avant-garde expressions on the west coast were less likely to be latent responses to decade-old conundrums of opticality and more likely to be responses to current and local artistic movements such as beat poetry, experimental film, and early pop art.
For poets and artists practicing on the west coast in the 1960s, the “pacific nation” included Vancouver. However, aside from shared topography and geo-economic variables, did this region share a particular and distinct aesthetic? And, how did Vancouver respond to and shape the discourse around west coast cultural practices? In *Utopia and Dissent: Art, Poetry and Politics in California*, Richard Cándida Smith examines the formation of the postwar avant-garde in California and explores the underlying philosophies and aesthetics guiding art production. Cándida Smith identifies the practice of poetry as the determining medium of the postwar avant-garde milieu in California:

Poetry: the most important corrective to the barbarities of the twentieth century was that people excluded from power claimed the right to speak for themselves about their lives. The narration of human experience in all its complexity, particularly from those who are despised and excluded from society’s rewards, challenged all complacent views of social life and subverted the power of any hierarchy pretending to be able to explain human action.5

Poetry was the medium through which artists in California most readily found expression that was commensurate with their social and intellectual beliefs. Specifically, there was a desire for freedom from the political realm and freedom from authority. This referred not just to freedom of the individual but to freedom of human experience from systems of control and social dominance; that is, a determination for other aspects of human existence, such as the spiritual to be accessed. For example, Kenneth Rexroth celebrated disengagement from the rest of society as a means of achieving autonomy and as “a form of spiritual independence.”6

History was understood in Benedict Anderson’s sense as a politically-constructed force used to bind people together in imagined collectives with common goals (nationalism, anti-communism). Because of its political nature, history as a way to

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5 Cándida Smith, xix.
6 Ibid., 31.
define groups of people and social practices was rejected. Instead, Cándida Smith argues, poetry was embraced by the avant-garde in California as a strategy for privileging personal experience. San Francisco poets, for example, sought spiritual and collective freedom. Alluding to poet-critic Baudelaire and his nineteenth-century critique of modern life, Robert Duncan used the term “bohemia” to characterize a type of utopia where the poetic act represents an existential, aesthetic, and spiritual challenge to institutional and commercial power.\(^7\) If history had perverted forms of wisdom, poetry and philosophy were forms of personal myth to create light.\(^8\) The themes of isolation, disengagement, and denial of history are crucial to the operation of “mythopoetics” in the California postwar avant-garde milieu and, as I will argue, to the formation of Vancouver’s avant-garde.\(^9\)

I want to extend Cándida Smith’s themes of isolation, disengagement, and denial of history beyond California to include Vancouver. Using Homi Bhabha’s formulation of transnational counter-narratives, Vancouver as a node in the west coast expands the region into Canada and further into “wilderness,” strengthening its promise of freedom and isolation. In describing Vancouver, Alvin Balkind linked isolation to the city’s “Western sense of freedom and expansion and absence of rhetoric.” He also alluded to Vancouver’s “natal” links with San Francisco and Los Angeles, suggesting their shared belonging in the west coast. He refers to the umbilical cords linking Vancouver to Los Angeles, thus having them share “precious body fluids.” This type of imagery indicates a belief in the myth of the west coast: a region conceived and born in isolation and embodying notions of freedom and

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7 Cándida Smith, 169. In Chapter Three, I analyze the theoretical dimensions of utopian formations, specifically in California and Vancouver.  
8 Ibid., 41. For histories of poetic activity in San Francisco, see The Beat Generation Galleries and Beyond, ed. Seymour Howard (Davis, Ca: John Natsoulas Press), 1996.  
9 Cándida Smith uses the term “mythopoetic” to refer to the personal meaning-finding in poetry.
Despite the diversity and difference contained within it, the west coast is understood as a distinct geo-historical region. Vancouver, Portland, Seattle, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and San Diego were all built at the end of the nineteenth century, on the edge of the continent, removed from national centres of culture and commerce. They were immediately mythologized in the notion of “The West” – the last frontier – where anything was possible. By the 1950s and 1960s, the cities also shared a common mixed topography that included mountains, ocean, the urban, the suburban, and the “wilderness.” The European pictorial conventions of “country,” “city,” and “nature” were blurred as each category disintegrated in the foreground of the ubiquitous view. European “technologies of vision” that had dictated both the perception of space and representation (such as the picturesque) were no longer applicable to the west coast. Vancouver and San Francisco may have been perceived as “bohemia” but they were sans flâneurs. Unlike Paris in the early 1960s, where the Situationists enacted their derives in the city, west coast artists were fixed in front of the view to become, as Robin Blaser put it, “spiritual travelers.” Balkind


12 “Technologies of vision” refers to Foucault’s analysis of regimes of power in the 19th century. The picturesque as a mode of visuality was the dominant form of landscape painting in nineteenth-century Europe and also informed Canadian landscape painting. For an explanation of the picturesque in relation to the west coast, see Matthew Stadler, “The Regime of the Picturesque,” in Baja to Vancouver, 135-43, and Robert Linsley, “Painting and the Social History of British Columbia,” in Vancouver Anthology: The Institutional Politics of Art, ed. Stan Douglas (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1991), 225-45.
reflects on Vancouver's cultural climate in the 1960s: "Vancouver was a city in which artists had to pull themselves up out of the morass of banality...it took on an air of excitement, determined to make a fresh start from the spiritual raw materials available to artists." This idea that the west coast contained "spiritual raw materials" was fundamental to the cultural and philosophical ethos of the region.

However, sharing historical and geographical similarities is not enough to be considered a distinct artistic milieu. The claim must be defended by demonstrating shared aesthetic practices, or in the very least, consistent ideological and/or critical approaches to representation. Cándida Smith attempts to do just that in presenting an outline of the discourses of the mid-century avant-garde in California. He offers the beginning of a critical vocabulary to address this region, one which proves instrumental to my conceptualization of a west coast avant-garde that includes Vancouver. The discourse consists of four main categories that outline normative positions of the avant-garde on the west coast, positions that extend beyond the arts to consider questions of subjectivity, spirituality, and difference:

1. The avant-garde on the west coast had a preference for cosmological-theosophical over psychological-sociological understandings of art and the individual's relationship to larger forces.
2. Private, interior experience was assumed to have a privileged relationship to cosmological process...individual choice was valued over social unity.
3. Freedom arose from the irrational, unlawful aspects of cosmological being; heterogeneity – i.e., difference – was fundamental to the human condition. Conformity was unnatural...historical "facts" served hierarchy.
4. Art was an exploration of being, "self-expression," but only in the sense of exploring the possibilities of self implicit in heterogeneity...the desired end result of freedom was not the solitude of individual belief, but a strengthened un-coerced collective agreement that took into account a greater variety of experience.

According to the above outline, the west coast avant-garde produced, and was

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14 This is an abbreviated list of the four main categories of the west coast avant-garde discourse that Cándida Smith outlines, 141.
produced by, specific discourses of spirituality, individuality, society, and art. Basically put, the outline presents four key ideas and beliefs: 1) the sacred, or the cosmic, was privileged over the profane; 2) the private inner-life of an individual related more to cosmology than to psycho-social imperatives; 3) freedom was found through human difference not conformity; and, 4) art was about process and response (dialogue) rather than a communication of a personal perception. While I generally accept these basic ideas, throughout the chapter I will attempt to add to and deepen an understanding of the critical discourses of the west coast avant-garde. In particular, I will focus on the poetic practices in Vancouver as they relate to both their local context as well as the larger construct of the west coast avant-garde.

At the University of British Columbia, Warren Tallman actively engaged with the San Francisco poetry scene. Also known as the San Francisco Renaissance, the artistic activity in San Francisco was electric: all forms of art converged, jazz hummed, independent bookstores and publishing houses thrived, and art galleries hosted poetry readings. Robert Duncan is considered to have catalyzed the artistic community in San Francisco after being barred from the Kenyon Review in 1944 for writing “The Homosexual in Society.” His treatise calling for the end of sexual

\[15\] Cándida Smith’s outline of west coast avant-garde discourses is useful as a starting point for analysis because it asserts the philosophical, social, and artistic specificity of the region and it demonstrates that other post-war avant-garde formations were taking shape outside of New York and on their own terms. However, my formulation of the avant-garde in Vancouver and the west coast diverges from Cándida Smith in two main ways. First and foremost, I argue that the poetics of Charles Olson and the process philosophy of A.N. Whitehead underpin the aesthetic practices of New American Poetry in California and by extension, in Vancouver. Cándida Smith’s thorough local analysis does not account for “outside” influences such as Olson, John Cage, and Whitehead that were fundamental in Californian radical poetics. Second, my study of Vancouver avant-garde practices analyzes poetics within a transnational context, particularly how and why American modernism was imported and translated into a Canadian context. Cándida Smith convincingly argues that the poetic avant-garde, especially in San Francisco, carved out isolated bohemian communities and claimed freedom and detachment. He shows how many poets took North American native cultures as subject matter and exoticized Asian Pacific practices such as Zen. Cándida Smith demonstrates how these “cross-cultural” borrowings bolstered their beliefs in freedom and non-conformity. However, he does not consider the social and political implications of such cultural appropriations, specifically for local Aboriginal and Asian communities. Furthermore, Cándida Smith does not explain the philosophical justification for the appropriations.
oppression was censored and he left New York for California in search of freedom. Black Mountain College in North Carolina, home to the most influential school of modernist poetry in the tradition of Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, closed in 1956, a closure that helped make San Francisco the heart of American avant-garde poetry. Duncan and Robert Creeley linked Black Mountain modernism with the nascent San Francisco poetry community; the latter included Kenneth Rexroth, Robin Blaser, and Jack Spicer as emerging local voices (many of whom had already published in the *Black Mountain Review*). Another group of poets were active: the beats. In 1955, Ginsberg read his legendary rant *Howl* at Six Gallery, scandalizing many Americans with its colloquialism, rudeness, and musical dissonance. Lawrence Ferlinghetti opened City Lights Bookstore in 1953 and published *Howl* in 1957. Gary Snyder, Lew Welch, Philip Whalen, and Michael McClure were involved with the beat scene in both Los Angeles and New York and were engaged with both Wallace Berman and Jack Kerouac. In *Reclaiming San Francisco: History, Politics, Culture*, Nancy Peters offers a critical history of the San Francisco Renaissance with a particular focus on beat activities. She writes:

> the beat phenomenon that took shape in San Francisco in the mid-50s not only dislodged American poetry from the academic literary establishment, it invigorated a democratic popular culture that was to proliferate in many directions: the anti-war and ecology movements, the fight against censorship, the pursuit of gay, lesbian, minority, and women's rights.¹⁶

The beat generation in San Francisco had a particular relationship with Black Mountain poets. Beat radicalism and Black Mountain academicism fused and their integration transformed the city into a 'polis' – a city where dissent and resistance

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was utopian. San Francisco promised bohemia, unlike other parts of California, specifically Los Angeles. Los Angeles was fast becoming a major centre of the aviation, automotive, and military industries. Economic prosperity was evidenced in new cars, suburbia, and the accumulation of consumer products. The city experienced unprecedented (sub)urban growth and economic boom. As reported in Life Magazine on 7 October 1957, in relation to the rest of the country California had “more cars, more swimming pools, heliports, religions, celebrities, tourists, and beautiful girls.”

With the aviation, entertainment and military industries expanding rapidly, and 4,200 new people moving to Los Angeles every week, California was the fastest-growing, sleekest, and most desirable place in the United States.

San Francisco, while certainly not untouched by national expansion programs and middle-class mentality, had a slightly different relationship to both the United States and North America. An alternate cultural milieu began to develop there. Draft dodgers who were interned in conscientious objector camps in Oregon re-located to San Francisco upon release. Black Mountain poets re-located to San Francisco and the beats formed a new generation of poets and radicals outside of New York to reside there. These three groups, with different histories, politics, and aesthetic practices, shared similar interests in the supernatural and in eastern mysticism – a preoccupation that was well-suited to the misty Pacific fogs of San Francisco and to the imagined closeness with Asia and the Pacific Rim. While Southern California held the promise of the American Dream, San Francisco promised connections with

\[17\] In his Vancouver Lectures in 1965, Jack Spicer took up the idea of the city as a community that is “open at the centre...and which is publicly shared and therefore always potentially in play.” The House that Jack Built: The Collected Lectures of Jack Spicer, Peter Gizzi, ed. (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1998), 97. See Chapter Three for an analysis of Jack Spicer’s Vancouver Lectures especially in relation to Utopia and the formation of the Vancouver avant-garde.


\[19\] Peters, 203.
the other world of Zen Buddhism as well as a communal look inwards to personal and spiritual reflection.

The "pacific nation" needed Vancouver as a crucial part of its construct to penetrate further into isolation, and thus into freedom. Tallman’s involvement with the San Francisco Renaissance, more than casual and coincidental, belonged to this coalition of artists forming the Pacific nation. As a major proponent of New Poetry, also called Open Form and Projective, Tallman was responsible for bringing the poetics of the San Francisco Renaissance to Vancouver.20 His preoccupation with New Poetry was lifelong and extended far beyond his classrooms at UBC. For example, Tallman was a colleague and collaborator with San Francisco critic Donald Allen, editor of the seminal anthology New American Poetry (1960) whose publication marked the force and significance of the new avant-garde poetry.21 In 1962, Allen asked Tallman to write an essay on the poetics of Charles Olson as a contribution to another anthology, New American Story.22 Allen and Tallman shared a dedication to New Poetry and their cross-border dialogue included exchanges about the poetry of Duncan, Ginsberg, Creeley, and Spicer. More pointedly, Allen encouraged both the growth of the local Vancouver poetry scene and facilitated the movement of San Francisco poets to Vancouver. This was done not through one or two visits, but rather through the repeated and sustained dissemination of California poetry through teaching and poetry readings. Vancouver poets were placed in the nexus of American modern poetry by a pedagogy that was structured and supported

20 New Poetry, open form, and projective poetry each refer to the poetic avant-garde led by Black Mountain writers, specifically Olson and Duncan.
21 Gladys Hindmarch recalls that Tallman assigned New American Poetry to his poetry class in 1961. Interview with Gladys Hindmarch for Open Letter, 2nd series, no. 1, winter 1971-2, Open Letter Archives, Contemporary Literature Collection, Simon Fraser University.
by Tallman in Vancouver, but equally by Allen, Duncan, Creeley, and Spicer in San Francisco.

**Tish Poetics: Charles Olson, A.N. Whitehead, and Language**

There is no one behavior system belonging to the essential character of the universe, as the universal moral. What is universal is the spirit which should permit any behavior system in the circumstances of its adoption.\(^2^3\)

- A.N. Whitehead (1938)

In February 1961, on invitation from Tallman, Robert Duncan came to Vancouver for the Festival of Contemporary Arts.\(^2^4\) After connecting with the young group of poets, he made a second trip in July when he lectured at Tallman’s house in the Vancouver Westside neighbourhood of Kitsilano.\(^2^5\) His latter visit marked not only the start of the poetry movement and magazine *Tish*, but also the beginning of a new tradition of poetry in Canada.\(^2^6\) Duncan brought the poetics of the San Francisco Renaissance with him, poetics that included particular philosophical and cosmological beliefs, specifically the theories and ideas of Charles Olson and Alfred North Whitehead. Reflecting upon meeting the young Vancouver poets for the first time, Duncan wrote to Tallman:

> If my excitement in Vancouver (it was, after all, finding the nucleus of a new poetry – wrong-headed enuf [sic], self-conscious enuf [sic] to

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\(^{24}\) Creating a west coast circuit was made more feasible by inexpensive and accessible travel - in 1961, a return airfare from San Francisco to Vancouver was $105.

\(^{25}\) Correspondence between Tallman and Duncan reveal the intensity of Duncan’s involvement in the Vancouver poetry movement. Subjects of correspondence include the Festival of the Contemporary Arts, the 1961 study group, and the Vancouver Poetry Conference in summer 1963. The formation of *Tish* was a result of Duncan’s study group, a post he accepted from Tallman, 7 June 1961. Warren Tallman Fonds, Contemporary Literature Collection, SFU.

\(^{26}\) *Tish* is the phonetic inverse of the word ‘shit’ - a title that appealed to the editors for its irreverence, phonetic play, and sound without lexical meaning. The journal was published between 1961 and 1969 and consisted of four editorial periods, the first of which is the main focus in this chapter.
label itself *Tish*; but eager and bold too – that keyed-up the visit) – if my excitement seems to have generated ideas and energies for you – I am, in turn, elated.  

In the article “Vancouver as Postmodern Poetry,” George Bowering recalls that the young poets in Vancouver, including himself, Fred Wah, Frank Davey, and James Reid arrived in the “big city” from small towns and isolated parts of the province looking for poetry:

> living in Vancouver in the late fifties and early sixties, the young poets (to be) knew first void and margin, saw the ocean everyday, and then looked for tradition...there was, as far as they could see, no tradition of Vancouver poetry...they were thousands of miles from history.  

The belief that they were “thousands of miles from history” allowed the young poets to create a new history on the blank slate of the Vancouver poetic landscape. To do this, they looked to traditions elsewhere with and against which to form themselves. As Bowering states, history in Vancouver was “makeshift, amateur...like a plywood café in Kispiox as opposed to a wise-crack deli in New York.” Tradition, however, was solid and could be transplanted into a place where there was seen to be no history. Duncan’s visit in 1961 brought American modern poetic tradition in the lineage of Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams to the “Vancouvers.” With this tradition in mind, Frank Davey, James Reid, George Bowering, Fred Wah, and David Dawson founded *Tish*. While *Tish* emulated American modernism, its poets started to shape their own poetics, one that, although based on theory and ideas of Duncan, Olson, and Creeley, concerned itself with Vancouver and writing poetry in Vancouver. In *Tish*, the poets were beginning to articulate an artistic consciousness and a sense of place, both linked to Vancouver and to Vancouver’s existence on the 

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27 Duncan to Tallman, 3 November 1961. Tallman Fonds, Contemporary Literature Collection, SFU.  
29 Ibid., 123.
west coast.

When the first issue of *Tish: A Magazine of Vancouver Poetry* appeared on September 1, 1961, Tallman was accused of creating a clone of California poetry. Davey and his peers felt that the Canadian poetry scene was derivative at best. Colonial in its tendency to imitate established schools of poetry, Canadian poets, such as the Confederation poets of the 1880s and 1890s, wrote from Tennyson and Keats. Davey cited the *McGill Fortnightly Review* as being a breakthrough in Canada for its basis in Imagist poetry that included poets such as Pound and Eliot. However, he asserted that it imitated them rather than originating new forms specific to its Canadian context. Other poets in Montreal and Toronto engendered the Canadian colonial stereotype of “the sturdy woodsman” who sought, on principle, to oppose American practice. *Tish* was anti-humanist and local, rather than romantic and national, and claimed to have “a disinterest toward paranoid individualism” that *Tish* poets claimed was practiced in eastern Canada. Davey argued that it was the American poets, specifically the Black Mountain group, that had changed the poetic landscape and could lead the way forward.

In “Wonder Merchants: Modernist Poetry in Vancouver During the 1960s,” Tallman explains how American modernism took hold in Vancouver, identifying

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30 This accusation was leveled against him by poets and writers in eastern Canada. Their proximity to the centre of Canadian federal government meant that they were closer to the anti-American sentiments of the government. Keith Richardson, *Poetry and the Colonized Mind: TISH* (Ottawa: Mosaic Press, 1976).

31 Geoff Hancock, *Published in Canada: A History of the Small Presses*, (unpublished manuscript, 15, Special Collections, Frank Davey Papers, Contemporary Literature Collection, SFU, no date).


33 Ibid., 24. In Canada, poets in Toronto and Montreal had a very different relationship to Black Mountain and new American poetry. Humanism was popular in Eastern Canada, especially with poets such as Irving Layton who was a leading component. Active and prolific poets in eastern Canada included Leonard Cohen, Al Purdy, Earle Birney, Avison, Dudek, Acorn, and Atwood. Tallman accused these poets of declining from modernism into a type of romantic existentialism. See Warren Tallman, “Wonder Merchants: Modernist Poetry in Vancouver During the 1960s,” in *Writing Life*, 27-69 (first published in *Boundary* 2, vol. III, no. 1, Fall, 1972).
Duncan's visit to Vancouver in July 1961 and his dissemination of Olson's poetics in particular, as the major catalyst. Olson's seminal treatise on poetry, *Projective Verse*, became a foundational text for all *Tish* poets and signaled, for them, the shifting of poetry from "an age of perception and into an age of proprioception." Perception is to take ideas and images from the world surrounding oneself, an act of apprehension that considers that events, objects, and people are outside of oneself. On the other hand, proprioception is "sensibility within the organism by movement of its own tissues." That is, the proprioceptive writer sees the surrounding world in the midst of himself/herself as subject. For Olson, the proprioceptive poet feels the world inside himself/herself and his/her poems are therefore the world speaking out through him/her – the poems are projecting.

Projective verse, or composition by field, is open and free rather than

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35 Phenomenology is the field of philosophy that examines the meaning and function of human perception. In considerations of 1960s art, including happenings, minimalism, post-painterly abstraction, and pop art where viewership took on new dimensions of bodily and perceptual experience, Maurice Merleau-Ponty has been the most cited philosopher of phenomenology. For example, Rosalind Krauss uses Merleau-Ponty's "embodied viewer" in a defense of minimal art ("The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum," in *October*, vol. 54, 1990, 3-17). In the present study, perception and experience are central to west coast practices; however, the philosophical basis of perception is specific. In the case of Californian poetics, including beat and projective poetry, "inner perception" is at issue. Where Merleau-Ponty believed that the world is "already there" and perceptions are complex cultural interpretations of an already existent environment, Whitehead developed a philosophy of process in which he argued that we create the world through our perceptions or through "occasions of experience." Merleau-Ponty and Whitehead do share points of connection such as anti-Cartesian dualism and the interconnection of all beings and entities in the universe. For a discussion of similarities and differences in Whitehead and Merleau-Ponty, see William S. Hamrick, "Whitehead and Merleau-Ponty: Healing the Bifurcation of Nature," in *Whitehead’s Philosophy: Points of Connection*, eds. Janusz Polanowski and Donald Sherburne (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 127-42.
36 Tallman, "Wonder Merchants," 32.
37 To be discussed in Chapter Two, proprioception and inner space will become increasingly evident and important in visual art production in Vancouver in the 1960s as it relates to Marshall McLuhan's notion of acoustic space. In *McLuhan in Space*, Richard Cavell argues that the most crucial concept in McLuhan's theory is space and that space lies at the heart of his paradigms of media and communication. Acoustic space, in particular, characterizes the shift from the mechanical to the electric age – it is an eye space giving way to an ear space. To be discussed in Chapter Two, acoustic space is a provocative concept as it raises the issues around changing subjectivity in the 60s. As a result of almost simultaneous technology that worked on all the senses, spatial relations were embodied in new ways – gaps between people, places, spaces, and time zones started to shrink and new relationships between self and other were configured. McLuhan was a presence in Vancouver, along with San Francisco poets, at the Festival of the Contemporary Arts in 1964.
descriptive. The language of projective verse does not work to describe the feelings or state of the individual poet. Rather, the poem is an instant or event in the poet’s life. In *A Special View of History*, Olson asserts that a person is not a subject of history, defined by history, but rather that “history is the intensity of the life process – its *life value*.”\(^{38}\) In other words, a person’s life is just one function, among many, of an individual – the historical function. Olson is concerned with the larger fields of an individual, such as the cosmos and universe, functions that are beyond history. He wrote: “if there is any absolute, it is never more than this one, you, this instant, in action.”\(^ {39}\) “Instantism,” then, surpassed history as a defining function of a subject.\(^ {40}\)

The most obvious manifestation of Olson’s poetics in *Tish* was in the use of language. *Tish* distinguished between language “as the act of the instant and language as the act of *thought* about the instant.”\(^ {41}\) The latter is description; a non-projective, static representation of a perception, memory, or idea. In opposition to description, Olson outlines three characteristics of projective verse: kinetics, principle, and process:

1. the *kinetics* of the thing. A poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it (he will have some several causations), by the way of the poem itself, all the way over to, the reader. Okay. Then the poem itself must, at all points, be...an energy-discharge.

2. is the *principle*, the law which presides conspicuously over such composition, and, when obeyed, is the reason why a projective poem can come into being. It is this: FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT.

Now (3) the *process* of the thing, how the principle can be made to shape the energies that the form is accomplished. And I think it can be boiled down to one statement: ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION...get on with it, keep moving, keep in, speed, the nerves, their speed, the perceptions, theirs,

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\(^{38}\) Olson, *A Special View of History* (Berkeley: Oyez, 1970), 49.


\(^{40}\) Bowering, 130.

\(^{41}\) Olson, *Human Universe*, 4.
Olson’s suggestions for poetry were clear; a poem must be kinetic, always in a state of “becoming” both in its writing and its reading. Olson’s belief that a poem is one instant in a life in movement and a universe in flux therefore meant that a poem couldn’t describe life— it is life. For him, art is a human endeavour and must, like a human being, be in flux, change, and movement. The kinetic does not describe—it moves. Olson’s poetics stem from a belief in universal energy, as stated in the first characteristic: “a poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it.” The energy is not self-generated within the artist but comes to reside within him or her from somewhere or something else. Poetry, then, comes from this source, not as a description, but as a discharge: “art does not seek to describe but to enact.”

The first issue of *Tish* very clearly states its Olsonian poetics. Bowering described the poem as only one ‘exposure’ of the poetic experience with the job of the poet to participate. His first poem in *Tish*, titled *Poet as Projector*, clearly demonstrates Olson’s projective verse:

I am the light & the way,
I, that, I that -
inner light

(undomesticated finger on the switch)

(of - “God?”)

And the film

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42 Charles Olson, *Projective Verse* (NY: Otem, 1959) 3-4. The genealogy of ‘projective verse’ is complex and can be traced to the early 1900s and to the Imagist poets, most notably William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound. The Imagist manifesto demanded economy of words, sequence of musical phrases, and free-verse. Imagists were picked up and absorbed by Black Mountain and then into *Tish* poetics. For history on Black Mountain poetics, see Beverly Mitchell, “The Genealogy of *Tish*” in *Writing Life*, 70-93.

My nature
to correspond, to
project

_to project_ the image
the image a reflection...
...perhaps...

a projection, yes
light thru film
enlarged in image for

it does not translate at the skin

"Art does not seek to describe
But to enact."
-ibid

I do not interpret,
I switch on & I switch out,
I enlarge the film,
my latent image of all phenomena

Me, the soul machine,
projecting a silver screen,
inner energy a long photo cell,
to light up a picture,

no ideas, but in things. 44

When Bowering states that "I am the light," he embodies the notion of the projective poet whose energy transfers through the poem to the reader. The art historical model of the slide projector is a useful analogy. The transparent slide is the poem, the projector is the poet, and the screen is the reader. The act of projecting verse, however, is non-deliberate and non-interpretive. The poet's "inner light" emerges instantaneously and its apprehension by the reader cannot be mitigated because the receiver is also enacting the poem instantaneously.

The last line of the poem is the famous dictum by William Carlos Williams:

“no ideas but in things.” Williams (1883-1963), sometimes associated with the Imagist poets of the early 20th century, was radical in his sharp rejection of romantic poetry and his use of straight-forward language and non-heroic subject matter.45 “No ideas but in things” delineates a belief that an object itself does not embody a larger idea or “truth” about nature. When Williams writes about a tree in “Young Sycamore” (1927), neither did he reflect on its roots that span heaven and earth, nor on its potential as a metaphor for the human condition. The tree in Williams’ poem is distinctly unromantic; it is a concrete reality in nature:

I must tell you  
This young tree  
Whose round and firm trunk  
Between the wet

Pavement with the gutter  
(where water  
is trickling) rises  
bodily

into the air with  
one undulant  
thrust half its height  
and then

dividing and waning  
sending out  
young branches on  
all sides-

hung with cocoons-  
it thins  
till nothing is left of it  
but two

eccentric knotted  
twigs  
bending forward

Williams’ poem foreshadows projective verse in principle and process – he was Olson’s mentor and the first of the modernist generation. The reader (“you”) experiences the tree bodily – spreading, waning, and thinning at the top. The poem’s form is consistent with its content (the form of the poem mimics the tree’s upward movement) allowing for the dynamic experience of reading it. Bowering’s poem in *Tish*, therefore, directly emulates Olson, and, through reference to Williams, activates the lineage of American modernist tradition.

In the same poem, Bowering writes of the poet’s “inner light” and “God,” alluding to another significant figure for the projective poets, philosopher Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947). In addition to disseminating Olson’s poetics in Vancouver, Duncan discussed at length Whitehead’s 1929 seminal text *Process and Reality* explicating “process philosophy” or “philosophy of organism.” The premise of Whitehead’s metaphysics, similar to the main principles of American pragmatism, is that every individual is essentially related to every other individual. There is no gap between human beings, between humans and nature, or between nature and the

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46 Quoted in Elder, 172. For an analysis of this poem and a discussion of “objectness” in Williams’ poetics, see 172-6.
47 Whitehead’s philosophy was informed by his background in math and physics and his theories were grounded in contemporary scientific developments, specifically those of Henri Bergson and Albert Einstein on the space-time continuum. As a philosopher, his work was in the realm of metaphysics and also consisted of theories on creativity and god. There is currently a rehabilitation of Whitehead in philosophy in the post-modern context partly because of his holistic conception of nature. See George R. Lucas, Jr., *The Rehabilitation of Whitehead: An Analytic and Historical assessment of Process Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 76-7.
48 In explaining “philosophy of organism,” Whitehead looks to philosophers and scientists of 17th and 18th centuries, including Descartes, Newton, Locke, Hume, and Kant in his query of “absolute idealism.” Whitehead’s process philosophy can be characterized by: “the distrust of language, the rejection of psychology in philosophy, the repudiation of the subject-predicate form of expression, the rejection of the sensationalist doctrine of perception, and the repudiation of the Kantian doctrine that the objective world is a theoretical construct from subjective experience.” Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, eds. David Griffin & Donald Sherburne (New York: Free Press, 1978). Preface, xiii.
cosmos – or, there is no bifurcation of nature.\(^49\) Thus, Whitehead challenges both Descartes’ mind-body duality and the believed separateness of beings. Instead, his “ontological principle” asserts that all entities are interrelated rather than independent:

> We diverge from Descartes by holding that what he has ascribed as primary attributes of physical bodies, are really the forms of internal relationships between actual occasions. Such a change of thought is the shift from materialism to organism, as a basic idea of physical science.\(^50\)

Whitehead’s basic category was creativity wherein he explains the process through which the “many become one.” Working against traditional Newtonian science where points in the universe exist independently of time and each other, Whitehead asserts that points, lines, and particles of matter exist in “space-time” and overlap. Thus, the cosmos is an energy field in which nature does not consist of separate “atoms” but of occasions of energy flux or exchange.\(^51\) In “field theory,” individuals are “events” of nature.\(^52\)

> Whitehead asserts that everything is in flux; however, he acknowledges that to deny permanency would be to deny the existence of patterns of order in the universe. If entities pass away and come into being, there must be something from which they

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\(^49\) Brian G. Henning, 3-4.
\(^52\) Entities are in a constant state of coming into being and fading away so that the perception of objects as stable is an illusion. “Actual entities” are the material, finite things of experience which in reality seem stable, but in fact are in flux. The reality of the object is that it is in process. An actual entity comes into being in stages. First, the past, or the continuum of unchanging energies and potential, what Whitehead calls “Eternal Objects,” puts itself forward in matter or data. In the second and third phases, the creative phases, the actual entity registers, adapts, and integrates the data and takes shape. Whitehead refers to actual entities as “drops of experience, complex and interdependent” (Elder, 321). An illustrative example is the beginning of a human life. Before and at conception, there exists a range of data and “energy,” that upon conception forms itself into a specific constellation. This is the first phase and it occurs through prehension or, “the means by which one actual entity becomes objectified in another or by which eternal entities ingress into actual entities” (Elder, 466). During the following creative phases, the human develops and is born as a finite entity that has a complexity of elements. This is called concrescence; it refers to the unification of many elements to form one complex entity. The human continues to grow, change, experience, develop, and then eventually fades away.
emerge and to which they return.\textsuperscript{53} This field which “feeds” all entities also exists within all entities – each one receives its identity from all others. It is this field that Whitehead reconciles as permanent; there always exists a field from which actual entities emerge (although the character of the field is in constant flux). This is creativity, the ceaseless energy of the universe and the force that perpetuates actual entities. The inherent aim for concrescence or creativity is for an actual entity to achieve its maximum complexity. However, Whitehead is not suggesting that the universe is a free-flow of creativity without principles of order because that would be chaos. Acknowledging patterns of creativity, Whitehead argues that there are limitations on creativity. God has been philosophically understood as the source of creative energy and while Whitehead does not assign God the role of creator, he does identify God with the principle of limitation.\textsuperscript{54} God is not omnipotent; actual entities possess free will in acquiring their character. God is not the source of creativity, but a part of it. The “divine” is atemporal and unchanging in the sense that it represents the potentialities of the universe and the consistency of their forms.

Williams, Olson, and Duncan were deeply interested in and influenced by Whitehead’s process philosophy.\textsuperscript{55} As Daniel Belgrad notes in \textit{The Culture of Spontaneity: Improvisation and the Arts in Postwar America}, Whitehead’s theories on individuality and creativity appealed to the post-war avant-garde because it offered a model of subjectivity that elevated the poet’s creativity to that of cosmic or universal creativity.\textsuperscript{56} Because the poet was an entity of the universe, his or her

\textsuperscript{53} Elder, 326.
\textsuperscript{54} For a discussion of God and the divine in Whitehead’s philosophy, see Elder, 336-40.
\textsuperscript{55} Both Elder and Belgrad identify the centrality of Whitehead’s philosophy to North American post-war avant-garde practices. However, Whitehead has not been brought to the discussion of Vancouver avant-garde practices of the 1960s. Elder and Belgrad’s analyses focus on film and poetry. My study attempts to link Whitehead to a more diverse range of practices including collage, sculpture, and painting.
\textsuperscript{56} Belgrad, 126-7.
emotional “matter” was connected to the cosmic energy force – even god. Olson’s ideas, in particular, emulated Whitehead. His notion of projective verse where the poet embodies universal energy and then projects it outward was similar to Whitehead’s formation of actual entities. Olson thought of the actual world as a field of energies (eternal objects) and the poet as an actual entity. Kinetic art mirrored Whitehead’s metaphysics of being – its principle of process was all about coming into being and fading away. In keeping with Olson, *Tish* poets consciously explored the metaphysics of being and struggled to write poetry that would not describe or romanticize aspects of existence, but rather manifest them. Re-iterating Williams’ slogan “no ideas but in things,” particularly Frank Davey who wrote the serial poem “No visions but in things” (1961), the poets found direct instruction on how to make poetry an experience. Following Olson, sounds and objects in poems were the poet’s immediate experiences; the concrete local realities of the poet’s environment. *Tish* poets understood these specific objects and sounds to be small “occasions” or events of the universe. For the projective poets, experiencing them was the only way of experiencing the greater entity; that is, God or the “divine”.

In the visual arts, the “object” was also under aesthetic consideration by artist Donald Judd who, in 1965, wrote “Specific Objects.” Judd claimed a new specific medium of sculpture that had its own irreducible essence and self-referential purity. The visual immediacy and instant bodily experience of Judd’s objects is perhaps similar to the immediacy of a process or projective poem. However, Judd’s

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57 Judd’s objects were an answer to Greenberg’s rules for painting – specificity, self-referentiality and irreducibility. While countering Greenberg, Judd ironically continued Greenberg’s doctrines of art. In Vancouver, artists such as Iain Baxter, Michael Morris, and Audrey Capel Doray were not part of the Kant-Greenberg axis but were instead grounded in aesthetics that engendered cross-disciplinary practices of movement, sound, and language. For more on Judd’s Greenbergian doctrine, see Thierry de Duve, “The Monochrome and the Blank Canvas,” in *Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris, and Montreal, 1945-1964*, ed. Serge Guilbaut (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 244-310.
formalism is part of a debate in Kantian aesthetics, initiated by Clement Greenberg and famously continued by Michael Fried in “Art and Objecthood” (1967). Tish poets, on the other hand, were based in poetic tradition coming out of Whitehead, a philosophy of organism that was anti-Kantian. Visual artists in Vancouver were also investigating non-formalist art. In Pneumatic Judd, Iain Baxter’s inflatable plastic replica of a metal Judd sculpture pokes fun at the notions of value and autonomy in modernist art. In the following chapters, as the cross-fertilization of poetry and art on the west coast becomes increasingly prevalent, these philosophical differences will be critical. For example, assemblage and happenings on the west coast will continue traditions of beat poetry and Olsonian process whereas minimal and early conceptual practices will continue, to some degree, formalist debates.\(^5\)

Tish poetics were based on Whitehead and Olson. During his visits to Vancouver, Duncan openly lectured on both thinkers and Vancouver poets such as Sam Perry, Dennis Wheeler, and Roy Kiyooka actively read Olson. With Duncan, Creeley, Spicer, and Blaser as integral members of the Vancouver poetic community, this philosophical basis strengthened and endured. Duncan remained a close colleague and mentor for Vancouver poets. In 1966 he wrote to Davey:

I believe the “inner” world is the outer world, often digested, sometimes neglected, translated, interpreted but always derived from What Is...this is exactly like the part of the poem which is at once essential to the totality of the poem, creating actively what that totality is, and at the same time exactly because its “god within” acts entirely to contribute to the total form.\(^5\)

This passage not only demonstrates Duncan’s adherence to proprioception but also explains why a poem must necessarily be proprioceptive to be an “occasion of the


\(^5\) Letter from Duncan to Davey, 6 Dec 1966. Frank Davey Papers, Contemporary Literature Collection, SFU.
Duncan espoused Whitehead’s philosophy and argued that the universe is a totality of creative energies that is always in the process of forming itself: every moment, every individual, every action, no matter how large or how minute, is an active and creative part of that totality. The projective poem is like a microcosm of the universe - it is a totality where inner and outer (subject and language) collapse and where each part of the poem is active in creating the entire poem.

In his essay entitled “One Man’s Look at ‘Projective Verse’” in *Tish* 5, Davey defends projective verse and Whiteheadian philosophy. In a survey of poetry and metaphysics since the 17th century, Davey asserts that Olson and Creeley have arrived back at the medieval doctrines of the universe; that humans are one small part of the total scheme and design of the universe. He writes:

There is the universe; there is experience. Man’s rightful place… has not changed since medieval times, and it is his job to get back to it. It is still one of humility before, submission to, and immersion in the greater natural order.61

*Tish* poets, while against romanticism in poetry, held a distinctly romantic view of nature. They believed that sound, dance, and music that was free from traditional poetic restraints could touch universal energy as “occasions of experience.” Their poems are personal “inner” songs; small beats in the larger rhythm of the universe through which poets are “able to listen to the music of the universe.”62 Duncan spoke about the “music at the heart of things” and Tallman embraced the vocal in poetry to “resonate the music of the universe.”63

*No Visions But in Things*, a serial poem by Davey, abandons the lexical or

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60 Letter from Duncan to Davey, 14 June 1967. Frank Davey Papers, Contemporary Literature Collection, SFU.
61 Davey in *Tish* No. 1-19, 101.
62 Ibid., 103.
63 Warren Tallman, “‘When a New Music is Heard the Walls of the City Tremble’ A Note on Voice Poetry,” in *Tish* 3, 12-3.
semantic function of words in favour of sounds and rhythm. Here, William Carlos Williams' concern for the specificity of experience is evoked through confrontation with sounds rather than objects. For Davey, sound is the projective poem's energy-discharge:

Love the touch of words
the sound of softness
of loudness
let them crowd
round about the ear
sound is a sound thing

Love the god
of sad
of mad
the near cantata of the
tintinabu
la
the pat-patting short sen-sen
vowels
on the anvil of your fear

Adhering to Black Mountain claims for language, *Tish* poetics embraced sounds, not words. In *The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition of Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, and Charles Olson*, R. Bruce Elder traces the influence of Olsonian poetics on visual art practices, specifically in the films of Stan Brakhage. He explains, "words cannot mirror reality, nor can works of art represent, refer to, or describe a world outside that of the poem itself; but a flow of sounds can form an autonomous reality." Sounds, made up of syllables, phones, and phonemes create their own syntax (pat-patting short sen-sen) and the poem itself becomes a Whiteheadian event.

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64 *Tish* 3, November 1961, in *Tish* 1-19, 69.
65 Elder, 39.
Olson’s *Projective Verse* explains that syllable, breath, and line are the main elements to sound poetry. In reading a poem out loud (*Tish* editors urged their poems to be read out loud), line dictates syllables spoken and when and for how long to take a breath. In this way, line and breath dictate the vocalization of the poem and give it its rhythm, its kinetics. These elements structure the sound and movement of the poem – they are part of the poem’s form. However, as Christian Moraru argues in “‘Topos/typos/tropos’: visual strategies and the mapping of space in Charles Olson’s poetry,” these elements are also visual. That is, the lay-out of the lines, both typographical and spatial, dictate the sound of the poem, therefore making vocalization a visual process as well as an energy discharge in sound. Moraru examines the visual potential of Olson’s poetics, specifically as they relate to his second law for projective verse: “FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF THE CONTENT.” While this dictum has been understood as a direction for language, Moraru posits it as having a twofold function in Olson’s poems: 1) to generate meaning figuratively though tropes and images (poetic); and, 2) to generate meaning through physical and topographical lay-out. (While the latter meaning is what is worked out in concrete poetry, Olson’s poetry still adheres to figuration.)\(^6\) Moraru presents a spatial reading of Olson, both in terms of the “space of representation” as well as the space of the page, arguing that Olson’s poetry can be understood as a visual process.

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\(^6\) For *Tish* poetics of sound, see: George Bowering, “Poetry and the Language of Sound,” in *The Writing Life*: 208-215. Fundamental parts of poetry such as dissonance, resemblance, tone, and rhyme are explained in this essay, and, Frank Davey “Rime, A Scholarly Piece” in *Writing Life*, 165-171 (first published in *Evidence*, no. 9, winter 1965).

\(^7\) Christian Moraru, “‘Topos/typos/tropos’: visual strategies and the mapping of space in Charles Olson’s poetry,” *Word & Image* (vol.14, no. 3, July-Sept 1998), 253-66. Moraru is not arguing that Olson’s work is concrete poetry because there is still an adherence to line and breath. However, concrete poetry will become important later in Vancouver with bill bissett, Gerry Gilbert, Gary Lee Nova, and Ray Johnson’s visit in 1969. For history of concrete poetry and relation to Olson’s poetics, see: *Concrete Poetry: A World View*, ed. M.E. Solt & Willis Barnstone (Bloomington: Hispanic Arts, 1968) and Marjorie Perloff, *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991).
read as "discourse on space (space thematized, treated as 'motif') and discourse of space, as it were, the poem as a recognizable shape, typographic body, iconically organized field." Moraru's reading is useful to an understanding of west coast aesthetics for two main reasons. First, it theorizes the relationship between sound and image, or language and visuality, a relationship that will be increasingly important to artistic practices on the west coast, such as filmmaking, happenings, and visual poetry. Second, Moraru connects Olson's spatial discourses in his poetry with his view on history. Specifically, in the *Maximus Poems*, Moraru insists that the lay-out on the page is a visual or semantic representation of historic waves of conquests and colonization. Given that Olson (and Duncan and *Tish*) favour myth over history, I think this is a particularly useful study for an understanding of poetics on the west coast.

Daniel Belgrad identifies the "ideogram" as central to post-war avant-garde practices. Ideograms give "language" to painting and "spatiality" to writing. Olson uses various visual repertoires in his poetry, including arrows, charts, genealogical trees, and maps. He is fixated on his location and personal history in Gloucester, Massachusetts and in "placements and displacements of frontiers." For example, in *as of Bozeman*, Olson traces the movement of families through immigration, migration, war, and natural phenomena; thus, charting waves or tides of human movement. Moraru suggests that in using a type of genealogical chart, "Olson's poem 'colonizes' the blank page, imposes its typographic presence on the virgin page by shaping itself into a discourse type that structurally doubles a motif in the poem."

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68 Moraru, 254.
69 For a definition of ideograms, see Belgrad, 83-9.
70 Ibid., 259.
71 Olson, *Collected poems*, 594-5.
72 Moraru, 259.
Olson’s and Duncan’s interest in historical waves of human movement is the subject of many poems in which they address the human, political, and social transformation of space. That is, through historic events, natural space is transformed into mythic space. An untitled poem from the *Maximus Poems* takes the wave motif and quickens it into a counter-clockwise spiral of words that Moraru argues is “the dynamic symbol in which nature and history meet.”

The poem is a saga of individuals, families and nations: “the final wave / of wash upon / this / desperate / ugly / cruel / Land this Nation / which never / lets anyone / come to / shore.”

The spiral’s continuation to the right in a smaller circle with falling words is Olson’s message to the “beloved Father.” His words drop away, mimicking the poet’s movement towards utopia and away from America: “from this / Rising Shore / Forever Amen [...].”

Olson’s ideograms, as Belgrad explains, were based on cross-cultural representations. In Chapter Three, I will discuss how John Cage fused Zen and dada in his visual poems or mesostics. Using methods of chance and the *I Ching*, Cage created a hybrid space that included English and Chinese language practices. Olson looked to the pre-Columbian cultures of the Maya for contemporary social alternatives and he studied Maya glyphs and believed them to be indicative of the “psychological energy” of the culture. Both artists were philosophically based in a Whiteheadian idea of universalism. My question is: how does process philosophy and Olson’s composition by field operate within the specific cultural paradigm of Vancouver? While Moraru argues that in Olson’s poetry, nature and history unite, I am suggesting the opposite. In Vancouver and British Columbia, the surrounding mountains and ocean were seen as “raw” and pure, and the fact that they had

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73 Ibid., 264.
74 Ibid., 264-5.
75 Belgrad, 89.
previously been territorialized by Indigenous people only added to their spiritual promise. However, nature still remained “unmediated” by history. Robert Linsley writes:

> The land in which the natives have been dispossessed of their property and power and rendered invisible, the land which to the early European immigrants seemed empty – though every part of it was lived in and claimed by native tribes – is for the artist a tamed and passive landscape; it offers no threat, and is therefore the ideal environment for the secularized spirituality of occidental Buddhism.\(^{76}\)

Linsley writes this in reference to the works of F.H. Varley and Jock MacDonald who painted in BC in the 1930s. He also relates the “denial of history” and de-politicization of land to Malcolm Lowry and the beat ethos of the 1960s, but does not address the role of open form poetics in sustaining this contradiction. *Tish* poets, using Olson’s projective verse, understood Vancouver as a locus through which they could use and access “nature” and “history” freely – appropriations or (mis)appropriations that were instrumental to building a utopia.

**Vancouver Poetics: locality, the politics of location, and difference**

*Tish* poets claimed that they were concerned with writing about the local. The poetics of Williams and Olson similarly declared a concern for the local realities of experience. Cándida Smith’s analysis of California art and poetry pivots around local notions of utopia and dissent. However, in each case, the term “local” is de-politicized and used in a literal manner to signify a specific place rather than the complexity of discursive practices that constitute that place. For example, while Cándida Smith’s analysis of the avant-garde examines the broad relationship between individuality, art, and the social, his analysis does not probe at the relationship between the avant-garde and its “constitutive outside.” For example, he does not

\(^{76}\) Robert Linsley, “Landscape and Literature in the Art of British Columbia,” In *Vancouver: Representing the Postmodern City*, 196.
critically address the west coast's preoccupation with "Eastern" spirituality nor does he seriously analyze the effects of the denial of history, namely, the naturalization of social relations. Cândida Smith asserts that a denial of history worked to free west coast artists from societal dominance; however, he does not examine the local political implications of this rejection of history. In this section, I aim to critically examine the philosophical and political implications of the poets' claim that Vancouver was "thousands of miles from history."

Post-colonial scholar Arjun Appadurai is particularly concerned with subjectivities and collectives that exist on the margins of the nation-state; that is, individuals and groups who have been colonized or are in the process of decolonization. As such, he is interested in alternate formations, such as diasporic communities and transnational localities, both which work to destabilize the nation-state. The west coast region, I am arguing, is a transnational locality, one that was formed in opposition to American political activity and oppressive social and cultural norms, including in opposition to the cultural hegemony of New York. As a locality, it consists of diverse locations and cities, and within each are discrete neighbourhoods. Neighbourhoods, Appadurai asserts, are social forms. They are also distinct areas with definable borders, sometimes ecological such as mountains, forest, or water. A neighbourhood is also a conscious designation as it recognizes the "other" contained within as well as outside of it.\footnote{Appadurai, 182.} Appadurai explains neighbourhoods:

> All locality building has a moment of colonization, a moment both historical and chronotypic, when there is a formal recognition that the production of a neighbourhood requires deliberate, risky, even violent action in respect to soil, forests, animals and other human beings.\footnote{Ibid., 183.}

A neighbourhood is produced and re-produced against other neighbourhoods and...
always consciously controls the movement of nature and people. It regulates its own
practices, practices that are imagined in relation to larger ones outside of the
neighbourhood. So, a neighbourhood contains ritualized local practices that have
physical and historical limits. Inevitably, neighbourhoods also bleed out of their own
boundaries through extended programs, new members, and dissemination, which
consequently produce both collaborations and antagonisms.

I would like to apply Appadurai’s ideas of locality to the west coast and
consider the University of British Columbia, Kitsilano, and downtown Vancouver as
neighbourhoods – as sites of distinct rituals, processes of identification, slippage, and
re-production. I would like to suggest also that the processes of neighbourhood
building and collaboration are acts of “re-territorialization.” Much has been discussed
in recent years, specifically by Deleuze and Guattari, of de-territorialization, the
effect of weakening local and national patterns of culture as result of globalization.
As its opposite, Edward Soja defines re-territorialisation as a re-building and re-
generating of particular regions, collectivities, sectors, and individuals to reconstitute
their territorial behavior.\(^{79}\) The formation of the west coast was a response to the
national cultures and crises at the time - an answer to Vietnam, to massive corporate
control, and to cultural control as well as against the patriotism and nationalism of
both Canada and the United States.

*Tish* poets were acutely aware of their location in Vancouver. They
recognized the city as a vital aspect of their production, calling it their “locus.”\(^{80}\) If
the proprioceptive poet necessarily writes from his or her locus, then the poem not
only embodies the physical and psychological forces of the poet’s environment, but

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\(^{79}\) Edward Soja, *Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions* (Malden, Ma: Blackwell
Publishers, 2000), 212.

also the autobiographical. Tallman asserted that Olson wrote from and through Gloucester, Massachusetts in the *Maximus Poems*: “eventually the city looks out through his eyes, speaks through his voice, remembers through his memory, has its meetings in his person.” In *Tish* 10, Samuel Perry contributed a substantive essay on the poetics of Creeley, Kerouac, Ginsberg and, in particular, Olson. Perry asserts that in the North American context, the individual exists in a specific environment in which personal freedom is overshadowed by the profound mistrust of space (airspace, public space) and the fear of destruction. Perry argues that in their locus in the context of North America’s “self destructive motion,” New American poets were finding new forms of personal meaning:

The first problem is to find a personal locus...They [Olson, Creeley, Kerouac, Ginsberg] give us their experience and memories in their autobiographical writings - establish a frame of reference - alongside the immediate events of their later works and so let us, as reader, translate the specific meanings of their sound words - units of measure - into our experience - our own frame of reference - and thereby share the motion they observe.

Perry re-iterates the importance of myth and personal meaning-finding as an antidote to historical and political ills. In open form poetry, sounds replace words as units of expression and thus allow for the reader’s own experience. For Perry, the autobiographical can transcend the political, translating into shared universal consciousness.

To suggest, as do both Perry and Tallman, that a personal locus is ultimately transcended to reach a higher or greater rhythm is ultimately to deny political realities. In 1962, Vancouver and Gloucester were not interchangeable. The Cold War played out differently in the two nations and, as Richard Cavell argues, in Canada the Cold War emerged as its own phenomenon different to both Europe and the United

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82 Samuel Perry, “MAXIMUS of GLOUCESTER from DOGTOWN: CHARLES OLSON Personal Locus,” *Tish* 10 in *Tish* 1-19, 204-10.
States. In Canada, there were two main dimensions to the post-war climate: 1) Ottawa and the governing Liberal elites exercised much more state-control than the US, exerting more control over national security, and 2) the government focused on self-representation and promoted a Canadian state that was anti-communist but also anti-American. This latter point, articulated in the Massey Report (1951) and embodied in the Canada Council (1957), is crucial as it defined much national cultural activity (activity against which the west coast was formed). Jody Berland writes:

The 1951 Massey Report made an explicit connection between autonomous culture and national defence...in protest against what the report called the “American Invasion”...Nationalism was a precondition to cultural autonomy.

The Cold War in Canada was culturally produced and the government made explicit the expectations around citizenship, culture, and the state. Of crucial importance was Canada’s political and cultural autonomy from the United States, a condition that was complicated by the signing of the North American Air Defense Command (NORAD) in 1957, which effectively integrated the US and Canada under one air defense system. By the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, Prime Minister Diefenbaker already questioned the agreement and did not cooperate with President Kennedy’s interventions in Cuba. This hesitation around defense created tension between the two nations, their governments, and citizens.

The artists of the “pacific nation” did not acknowledge their national borders and Tish poets rejected political alignments. Their locus did not refer to national identity but to inner space. They rejected national classifications, political jingoism,
and patriotism and believed that "the community of poetry is a universal thing, as is man, and political divisions can never apply."\textsuperscript{86} They disengaged with politics as a way of arriving at utopia. The burgeoning Vancouver poetic avant-garde, with its import of American modernist thinkers and artists to UBC, transgressed and offended Canadian nationalism. Equally, American dissidents going to Canada were rejecting American nationalism. \textit{Tish}'s locus at the English department at UBC was an institutional "neighbourhood" built on American modernism. With claimed detachment and freedom of expression, the \textit{Tish} movement was like a little bohemia. On one hand, its existence within a rapidly growing conservative and bureaucratic institution seemed ironic. The university whose site had been First Nations land, logged land, military land, and finally a university campus, did not embody a history of "freedom."\textsuperscript{87} On the other hand, the idea of "the university" promised an intellectually free and in the case of UBC geographically isolated space within which to create an alternative and radical poetry movement.

As the "pacific nation" was forming itself, the actual physical space of British Columbia was transforming. Like California, British Columbia experienced unprecedented economic, industrial, and institutional growth during the 1950s and 1960s. Under the leadership of W.A.C. Bennett, the Social Credit Party governed for twenty years from 1952 to 1972 and its fiscally conservative and populist mandate propelled business, institutional, and physical development.\textsuperscript{88} Bennett's leadership

\textsuperscript{86} \textit{Tish} 8, April 1962, in \textit{Tish 1-19}, 155.

\textsuperscript{87} In Chapter Three, I will analyze the university as a utopian site of student activism and alternative cultural formations. For a history of the University of British Columbia, land uses, and built environment, see \textit{Recovering the University Fabric}, (project of the UBC Departments of Art History, Visual Art & Theory, Architecture, and Geography).

\textsuperscript{88} Social credit was conceptualized in England in the 1920s by Scottish engineer Major Clifford Hugh Douglas as an economic and fiscal reform policy. In Canada, the western provinces embraced Social Credit with fervour: In 1923, Douglas appeared before the Committee of the House of Commons on Banking and Industry; in 1935, the Alberta Social Credit Party was formed; and in 1949, the Social
was punctuated by several accomplishments: BC Hydro, BC Ferries, the establishment of the Bank of British Columbia, and highway infrastructure throughout the province. One of Bennett’s top mandates was to harness BC’s hydro power through extensive damming and, in partnership with the United States, develop a power system that would ensure the province’s long-term prosperity. Wilderness lands were transformed, bridges were constructed in Vancouver and throughout the province, and modern, efficient transportation became a vital concern for the government whose province was expanding over mountains, across waterways, and along shorelines.89

*Tish* poets absorbed these changes and were particularly preoccupied with Vancouver as “a city held together by bridges.” Bridges became a major vortex of energy in their poems. A bridge is an evocative object: it is a physical feat of engineering, a symbol of strength and ingenuity, it links two land masses (communities, cities, countries) together, it connects two verses in a song, and it is the most crucial part of a metaphor, linguistically and cognitively linking the metaphorical term and the object of the conceit. In Olsonian terms, it is a vector of energy in the field of composition, carrying energy from the poet, through the poem, to the reader. In his hard-edge painting *The Bridge* (1965), Roy Kiyooka also explores the joining of two separate spheres through lines and vectors. In *Tuesday Credit Party of British Columbia* was founded. Douglas also wrote extensively on money and banking: *Economic Democracy* (1935), *The Monopoly of Credit* (1931), and *The Use of Money* (1935). Douglas was not a socialist critic of capitalism; he wanted capitalism reformed so that individuals had freedom as both producer and consumer. While he accepted that capitalism raised production to new highs and that human needs could be satisfied on most levels, he was concerned that many people did not have the means to consume the production. The idea of “credit” for each citizen was to increase individual purchasing power and reduce poverty. Not surprisingly, Douglas’ ideas were intriguing to fringe economists and intellectuals: John Maynard Keynes referred to social credit as part of the “underworld” of economic theory, and Ezra Pound, hero-poet to Olson, Duncan and Creeley, became associated with the English Social Credit movement and was refreshed by Douglas’ philosophical bent. For a more detailed analysis of social credit philosophy, see David Mitchell, *W.A.C. Bennett and the Rise of British Columbia* (Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 1983), 104-9.

89 By the mid-1960s, the student body was, by and large, skeptical of Bennett’s leadership, specifically in terms of his control over academic administration and funding.
Poem, when Bowering names Vancouver as a city “held together” or “pinioned by bridges,” the city becomes a causeway of energy, a locus erupting with creative potential.  

Several *Tish* poets wanted to travel back across time to witness Indigenous culture at the time of European contact. Their poetic flights were a part of their belief in art as “a go-between, a communicator, a means of testimony.”

tentative *coastlines*, a serial poem by David Dawson, bridges UBC with “200 years of beach.” Dawson is the “I” in the poem, witnessing the arrival of Spanish ships on Point Grey beaches and being present to hear the “ripples of ghost-ships”:

I

from where I stand
here on the beach
the sands reach
back 6 miles to the city,
and west to the point.

200 yrs. of beach
reaching back to
valdez
quadra
spanish galleons in the bay
scanning our shores

:winds veer
and the bold sails
fill,
(a scarlet
maltese cross
emblazons each)
cracking with the strain.

slowly leaning to port
the sharp prow
smashes whitecaps.

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90 With the bridge metaphor, *Tish* poets personified Blaser’s “spiritual traveler” and sought to transcend their locus through its raw materials. A poem in *Tish* 6, February 1962 (*Tish* 1-19, 129), claimed that poets could ride: “on the hump back bridge / that gives a man a chance / to travel from himself / to someone else / at the other pinned in point.”

91 *Tish* 10, June 1962, in *Tish* 1-19, 201.
a rattle of swords
and silver breastplates
rings in the still sea-air.

behind them, a bubbling wake
and the shrill screech of gulls.

tonight I hear
a whisper over sand
the ripples of ghost-ships.\textsuperscript{92}

Robert Duncan praised \textit{tentative coastlines} as a breakthrough and a bridge in consciousness, re-iterating that “poetry reaches back in time as well as in space.”\textsuperscript{93}

His point of view reflected Whitehead’s beliefs about poetry – that a poem is an instant or occasion in time and space.\textsuperscript{94} Dawson’s use of first-person and present tense gives sensation to the “scanning, cracking, smashing, bubbling and whispering” of the galleons and he places himself not only at the scene but also as a participant in it. His use of small letters for proper names, such as valdez, quadra, spanish, and maltese shrinks historical distance. History and cultural difference collapse to endow the coastline with Olsonian movement and energy. But, if we deploy an “ethics of memory,” what are the implications for contemporary First Nations cultures when European contact is romanticized in this way? \textsuperscript{95} Dawson continues:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{92} Tish 12, August 1962, in \textit{Tish 1-19}, 242-3.
\item \textsuperscript{94} Whitehead believed that the poetic medium was the process of creativity itself and that poetry was the act of becoming that characterizes existence. He believed that the “primary message of the poet was a fundamental intuition central to the experience of each of us.” See David L. Hall, “Whitehead, Rorty, and the Return of the Exiled Poets,” in \textit{Whitehead’s Philosophy}, 97.
\item \textsuperscript{95} In “A Chronology of Love’s Contingencies,” Marcia Crosby examines Emily Carr’s relationships with First Nations communities and her “memories” of friendship within the context of Euro-Canadian/ Native social relations in the first half of the twentieth century. Arguing that memory is always derived in the present, Crosby’s analysis asserts that an individual is informed by their own writing process and by the historical context of their moment. In my analysis of \textit{Tish} poetics, I similarly argue that the poets’ “memory” of European contact was based on a particular desire in the present – in this case, a desire to connect with their locus and to carve out a new culture of poetry. Marica Crosby, “A Chronology of Love’s Contingencies,” in \textit{Emily Carr: New Perspectives on a Canadian Icon} (Ottawa/Vancouver: National Gallery of Canada and the Vancouver Art Gallery, 2006), 156-69.
\end{itemize}
III

i

to the north of my mountains
the Kwakiutl once lived
with their chief,

my lord maquinna

light of the thunder god
resplendent in otterskins
and copper,

keeneyed son
of the eagle, and

cousin to the kingfisher;

his god, the blackeyed
one of the sea, whose
ways are dark

:the great seabird,
bird of fire
bird of thunder

ii

I would walk with him
in the shade of memory
beside bright water
and cool stone.

in the seagreen bright
of day

I would
pray with him,

& then lay down
between his bronze-brown thighs

to come into maquinna,

My lord maquinna,

ME.96

With himself as a witness, Dawson uses personal myth to connect himself spiritually
with the First Nations (I would / pray with him). In addition to projecting “Kwakitul”
culture as powerful and divine (light of the thunder god / resplendent in otterskins /

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96 Tish 12, August 1962, in Tish 1-19, 244.
and copper), Dawson eroticizes Maquinna (bronze-brown thighs) and sexualises his own spiritual awakening (to come into maquinna, / My lord maquinna, / ME.)

_tentative coastlines_ is an example of “nostalgia without memory,” where a group or culture is sentimentalized through an appropriation of their history.\(^9^7\) While Jameson uses this term to describe a post-modern practice of pastiche as an approach to history using narrative and myth, I want to question the political implications of this method in the context of British Columbia and _Tish_.

In “Construction of the Imaginary Indian,” Marcia Crosby critiques the practices of art history in relation to First Nations history and culture. Despite postmodern plurality and diversity, Crosby argues that the European master narratives of history and culture still dominate, resulting in a lack of First Nations self-representation in academics. Most relevant here is her critique of Bowering’s _Burning Water_ (1980), a metafiction of Captain Vancouver’s “discovery” of the northwest coast. While Crosby acknowledges its postmodern approach, she nonetheless argues that it continues to erase Indigenous voices:

> For the First Nations reader, there is the uncomfortable recognition of the dominant culture once again engaged in a conversation with itself, using First Nations people to measure itself, to define who it is or is not…\(^9^8\)

For Crosby, the danger of parody or postmodern allegory is that while these strategies attempt to be self-critical, the “self” remains the normative European subject and disbars “other” subjectivities.

In her recent book _Unsettling Encounters: First Nations Imagery in the Art of Emily Carr_, Gerta Moray asserts that in the history of art production in British

\(^9^7\) Examples of appropriation of First Nations culture in _Tish_ include _So Long, Mungo_ by Jamie Reid in _Tish_ 14, and _Totems_ by Frank Davey in _Tish_ 17.

Columbia, non-native writers and artists have had the tendency to “go native.”

Referring to the discourse around the work of Emily Carr, this term points to the desire to connect and identify with aboriginal people, culture, and history in order to claim belonging to the province. This appropriation is propelled by the belief that First Nations cultures are a block or obstacle to “new” cultural and land formations. Therefore, “going native” is a strategy to appropriate and thus neutralize Indigenous cultural, territorial, social, and political investments. Moray also suggests that there are two sides to “indigenization” – rejection and appropriation. While Dawson and other Tish poets used appropriation, rejection was the main strategy in the visual arts in the 1960s, as evidenced by the almost complete lack of representation in avant-garde art (dance, film, painting).

The diminishment of First Nations history erases the brutality of colonization and assumes a natural progression of events. In visual art, the violence and terror of colonization have been washed away. Robert Linsley in “Painting and the Social History of BC,” examines painting in relation to the representation of the colonization and dispossession of First Nations, specifically looking at Varley, Emily Carr, Jack Shadbolt, and Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptan. One of Linsley’s major arguments is that traditions of landscape painting do not exist outside the social, and that traditions such as picturesque painting and expressionism are social practices. For example, Linsley argues that Emily Carr’s paintings often eroticize nature, transforming wilderness

100 By contrast, visual art in Vancouver in the 1940s and 1950s, specifically painting, appropriated Indigenous culture in work by artists such as Jack Shadbolt and B.C. Binning. On the west coast, surrealism embraced primitivism; that is, it appropriated aboriginal culture as a way to connect with nature and to release the subconscious mind. Wolfgang Paalen’s Dyn magazine is an example of a European strain of primitivism on the west coast. For histories of American surrealism and primitivism, see Belgrad, 56, and, Sylvia Fink, “The Dynaton: Three Artists with Similar Ideas – Lee Mullican, Gordon Onslow Ford, Wolfgang Paalen,” in California: 5 Footnotes to Modern Art History, ed. Stephanie Barron (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1977), 35-41.
destroyed by industry into sensual landscapes. He writes that “the gendering and
gendering and sexualization of landscape is a long-standing theme in British Columbia art… it is
sexualization of landscape is a long-standing theme in British Columbia art… it is
often entangled with environmental politics.” Representation in British Columbia
often entangled with environmental politics.” Representation in British Columbia
has embodied a particularly strong connection between history, land, and race. For
has embodied a particularly strong connection between history, land, and race. For
instance, while Williams’ tree in Young Sycamore (1927) evokes an autonomous
instance, while Williams’ tree in Young Sycamore (1927) evokes an autonomous
experience, Carr’s iconic Scorned as timber, beloved of the sky (1935) places the tree
experience, Carr’s iconic Scorned as timber, beloved of the sky (1935) places the tree
at the centre of transforming landscape and, as Linsley writes, stands as a “protest at
at the centre of transforming landscape and, as Linsley writes, stands as a “protest at
the rape of the land, a utopian statement of hope.” Tish poets, like Carr, also
the rape of the land, a utopian statement of hope.” Tish poets, like Carr, also
oriented themselves to the mythic “tribes” of the northwest coast. They had an
oriented themselves to the mythic “tribes” of the northwest coast. They had an
Olsonian interest in history as myth; conquests and colonization took on a personal
Olsonian interest in history as myth; conquests and colonization took on a personal
form in Olson’s Maximus Poems and Dawson’s tentative coastlines. In the latter case,
form in Olson’s Maximus Poems and Dawson’s tentative coastlines. In the latter case,
the very real political violence and lived human experience (dispossession and
the very real political violence and lived human experience (dispossession and
disease) are erased in favour of a nostalgic perception of culture. When Dawson
disease) are erased in favour of a nostalgic perception of culture. When Dawson
invokes the Kwakwaka'wakw, he romanticizes them in order to elevate his own
invokes the Kwakwaka'wakw, he romanticizes them in order to elevate his own
spiritual disposition, with the Kwakwaka'wakw acting as a vehicle (the spiritual raw
spiritual disposition, with the Kwakwaka'wakw acting as a vehicle (the spiritual raw
material) for his cosmic and personal freedom.
material) for his cosmic and personal freedom.

Cándida Smith, Elder, and Belgrad do not pose certain questions that are
central to an understanding of cultural processes of post-war avant-garde formations
central to an understanding of cultural processes of post-war avant-garde formations
in North America, namely those of ethics. Do Whitehead’s process philosophy and
in North America, namely those of ethics. Do Whitehead’s process philosophy and
Olson’s projective verse enable pluralism and diversity? To what extent is cultural
Olson’s projective verse enable pluralism and diversity? To what extent is cultural
difference erased or embraced? And, was the west coast avant-garde concerned with

difference erased or embraced? And, was the west coast avant-garde concerned with

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101 Linsley, 231.
103 Linsley, 231.
104 Much has been made of the ethics of Greenberg’s formalism and the reign of taste and objectivity in formalist judgment. In the 1960s, Olson’s and Black Mountain poetics were dominant in poetic practice and also need to be critically analyzed.
“freedom” only insofar as it concerned itself?

Whitehead’s understanding of individuality was inflected by his cosmological belief in the ontological sameness of all entities in the universe. Poets such as Olson, Duncan, Dawson, and Davey thus found a philosophical basis for writing about Indigenous cultures in an attempt to expand and enlarge dimensions of human experience. On one hand, pluralism opened up “cross-cultural” dialogue and promoted the notion that while there are differences “of kind,” as Whitehead termed them, individuals, animals, and organisms are all objects and events of “equal” value. Whitehead’s theories of cosmology and metaphysics did not and could not support historicism and notions of Kantian individualism and, in this sense, were attractive to avant-garde artists who were against hierarchy in social and political structures.105 However, in practice, in a distinctly un-Whiteheadian world, the idea of universal oneness could easily translate into a Eurocentric oneness. So, when Dawson “remembered” the Spanish galleons arriving on the shores of Point Grey and when he “became” Maquinna, though his intention may have been a cross-temporal experience of myth (like Olson’s Maya), within the real and political realm of social relations in British Columbia, the poem runs the risk of further entrenchment of “western” subjectivity.106

Gerta Moray asks, like many before her, who can write and speak for whom? I am not suggesting that poets such as Olson, Dawson, and Duncan were “wrong” or even “unfair.” Removing individual intent in the Foucauldian sense, it then becomes a question of the relationship between power and knowledge in discourse and,

105 For a discussion of Whitehead’s organic model of individuality, see Henning, 66-75.
106 James Clifford addresses the ethnocentrism of Orientalism: “...the privilege of standing above cultural particularism, of aspiring to the universalist power that speaks for humanity, for the universal experiences of love, work, death and so on, is a privilege invented by a totalizing Western liberalism,” “On Orientalism,” in The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-century Ethnography, Literature and Art (Cambridge, Mass and London: Harvard University Press, 1988), 263.
recognizing that memory is derived in the present, provokes an exploration into larger social relations in that historical moment. In British Columbia, this particular set of issues was and is ever-present and shifts with epistemological queries that arise from “both sides.”

In open form poetics on the west coast, not only were First Nations subjectivities part of avant-garde self-definition, but so was gender identity. Specifically, masculinity remained the normative gender-position, with femininity as a foil. This is not to say that there were not major discursive shifts around sexuality, in fact, the beats, in particular, confronted sexual oppression and censorship. In their writing, take for example *Dharma Bums* and *Howl*, Kerouac and Ginsberg re-defined maleness in terms of homosexuality, rallying for a new type of masculine hero. Their hero was a man who fought for sexual freedom but without “Woman” as the object of lust or conquering. Nonetheless, while gay sexuality challenged societal values, masculinity secured its designation as the dominant sexuality. As Cándida Smith writes:

> The spiritual salvation of the young man lies in his ability to salvage as much as he dare of his raw natural force and postpone the process of maturation until it can be achieved on the basis of personal experience.

Maleness and masculinity are preconditions for spiritual and personal freedom. For Dawson in *tentative coastlines*, this took form in the figure of Maquinna. Indeed, through their sexual union, Dawson himself transforms into a spiritual and mythic “chief.” In the instances when maleness is heterosexual, masculinity is re-articulated

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107 In his introduction to *The Predicament of Culture*, Clifford quotes a poem by William Carlos Williams to demonstrate what he terms “ethnographic modernity.” Clifford uses Williams’ poem as an example of a more complex notion of difference in which the culture in question is neither entirely appropriated nor rejected. Instead, “something” is still “given off” from the marginalized history and Williams wants to access it. 1-7. I am arguing that Williams’ (and Duncan’s and Tish’s) serious interest in Whitehead is a likely source for this belief in pluralism.

108 Cándida Smith, 150.
through sexual prowess and desire. Sound, rhythm, and breath are the elements that make up projective verse and in *Tish*, they often take form in sexually evocative poems. In fact, male sexuality and projective verse are coupled together in order to achieve spiritual freedom. Bowering's *Sunday Poem* is a clear example of Olsonian poetics (both verbal and visual) as well as personal (male) experience:

```
I love your
  mystical overnight opening
  of the flower
    autumn purple
  reflected lights in your
noon day sun day eyes

So that
  I catch
my breath
  (lungs full of midnight air)
:the overnight opening)

I swear
  there are
pieces of pollen
in the air you breathe into my lungs

And your
  hair
    I am mystified
by the forehead dance of air
  in the night
verdant

    I feel
  the light blood
in and around my legs and arms \(^{109}\)
```

The rhythm produces the poem’s sensation. For example, the resemblance of sounds contained within the term “mystical overnight opening” creates a steady and identical

\(^{109}\) *Tish* 2 in *Tish* 1-19, 47-8.
beat and works to pace the breath and the sounds. Or, the repeated monosyllables in
“noon day sun day eyes” speed up the rhythm but keep it steady. Line and syllable
and breath, Olson’s units for projective verse, create the sound of the poem. With its
steady, breathy beat that slows and quickens, the poem is the transfer of sexual
energy.

The political implications of the denial of history did not just affect the
subjectivization of First Nations people on the west coast; it also obscured historic
and economic conditions between North America and Asia. Blaser’s construct
“pacific nation” is representative of a larger global geo-political imperative: the
beginning of the invention of the Pacific Rim, a construct that has profound economic
and political significance in the 21st century. In the 1960s, what were the implications
of this term and what were the forces shaping it on the west coast? As Arlif Dirlik
asks, “What is the Pacific? Whose Pacific?”110 It is ironic that in the aftermath of
Korea, in the midst of the Vietnam crisis, and in the shadow of Maoist China,
Blaser’s “pacific nation” was a spiritual and artistic construct. The Pacific region was
developing as a Euro-American economic community. The west coast’s idealization
and romantic preoccupation with Buddhism and Asian spirituality, deliberately or not,
de-politicized the relationship between North America and Asia.111 While the avant-
garde sought disengagement and Tish poets declared themselves to be immune to
political or national labels, the artists were nonetheless implicated in the larger global
economic situations against which their locality and neighbourhoods were
constituted.

The history of the “Pacific Rim” and its relationships with Europe and North

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110 See Dirlik, 22-9, for a discussion on origins and history of the construction of the “Pacific Rim.”
111 Vancouver, and the west coast, constituted its modernity (and its avant-garde) in relation to the
otherness of Asian spirituality and culture and, in this sense, had its own local form of Orientalism.
America is complex, not least because of the region’s diversity and varying colonial histories. Most obvious is Japan’s position in the 20th century as one of the United States’ greatest enemies and rivals. In particular, with Japan’s rise as an industrial power post-WWII, the hegemony of the United States in the Pacific was contested. During the 1950s and 1960s, North America tried to contain threats and organize the nations within East and South Asia. “Painted red” in the 1950s, China was considered to be a threat to its neighbours: South Korea, Laos, Cambodia, South Vietnam, Taiwan, Indonesia, Thailand, and Japan. In the 1960s, the “Pacific Rim” emerged as a new capitalist community with its non-communist members as allies to North America and Europe. “Rimspeak” was heard, signaling a new major economic and political discourse of the decade, and the Pacific became a gauge for cold war rhetoric. For example, Mao’s “east is red” launched the initiatives of the Leap Forward to rival Britain’s productivity, W.W. Rostow, under Kennedy, wrote the “non-communist manifesto,” and in 1967, Nixon wrote:

The US is a Pacific Power...Europe has been withdrawing the remnants of empire, but the US with its coast reaching in an arc from Mexico to the Bering Straits, is one anchor of a vast Pacific community. Both our interests and our ideals propel us westward across the Pacific, not as conquerors but as partners...

Nixon’s intentions were followed later in 1971 when he re-opened trade with China in an effort to capitalize Asia.

The exoticization of Asia results in a particular tension within west coast avant-garde discourses. In romanticizing peoples or cultures, those peoples and cultures are stripped of their political and historical contingency and instead naturalized as timeless and mythic. Therefore, while the poets and artists of the west coast were fixated on the religious dimensions of Asian countries (China, Tibet, and

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112 Cumings, 56.
113 Ibid., 57.
Japan) as promising spiritual understanding and freedom, the political realities of Asian cultures were erased. This tension had particular resonance on the west coast as Asian immigration, labour, and citizenship were a significant aspect of local histories. In British Columbia, the tension was underwritten by a long history of Asian immigration to the province, accompanied by racist immigration laws. Recent history included 22,000 Japanese-Canadians “interned” in camps during the Second World War, an act of hatred that was only addressed in the eighties.\(^{114}\) The United States had been “at war with Asia” from 1941-1975, and the west coast with its imagined belonging to the mystical “pacific nation” and its local connections with Asian-North Americans had a distinct position in the pan-Pacific war.\(^{115}\)

Cándida Smith addresses the west coast preoccupation with eastern spirituality and Zen Buddhism; however, he is insufficiently critical of the appropriation and exoticization of different spiritualities. Wallace Berman had a dedication to the kabbalah, Ginsberg followed Tibetan Buddhism, Gary Snyder studied ascetic Zen Buddhism, and Duncan maintained an enduring interest in theosophy.\(^{116}\) Snyder, for example, a reader and correspondent with *Tish*, was fictionalized in Kerouac’s beat-bible the *Dharma Bums* (1956). Snyder studied Japanese and Chinese, completed four years of Buddhist study, and went to Japan in search of dharma (the path of truth or the continuous path of “forming and firming”).\(^{117}\) Cándida Smith insists that Snyder did not romanticize non-western societies and, while this may or may not be the case, it is my argument that the west coast avant-garde, as a whole, did objectify and romanticize the cultures of Asia.

The “pacific nation” was a transnational formation that wanted to be removed


\(^{115}\) For a history of war in Asian countries, see Cumings, 64.

\(^{116}\) Cándida Smith, 290.

\(^{117}\) Ibid., 374.
from and alternative to the national narratives of both Canada and the United States. In particular, American radical poets rejected the consumer and war culture of the US and perhaps their interest in Asia was consistent as a way to be anti-American. Fred Wah, Roy Kiyooka, and Takao Tanabe were practicing artists in Vancouver in the 1960s as part of the emerging avant-garde and they later became political about their ethnic and racial identities. For example, poet, artist, and teacher Roy Kiyooka, a profoundly influential figure for artists in Vancouver, became actively involved in the Japanese redress movement in 1980s. Kiyooka’s significant role in Vancouver’s formation as an avant-garde centre highlights the tensions contained within west coast discourses and, in particular, raises the issue of “zones of containment” that constituted the locality of the west coast. Given that locality (and neighbourhoods) is relational, Japan was “outside,” an entity against which the United States, Canada, and the west coast each produced itself. Roy Miki writes about the national narrative of race and immigration:

the conjunction of victim positioning and cultural ‘arrival’ served to allow for both the erasure and disavowal of the foreclosures that externalized the non-whites in the body politic, not only First Nations collectives, but also the ‘other’ who included those identified under the general discursive category, “asian,” or as “japanese,” or “chinese.”

Miki continues that externalization is always double-edged because while a group may be externalized, it is still contained within the larger narrative as an “outside.” In their containment, local and cultural histories are disavowed and erased, even in postmodern pastiche (such as tentative coastlines when myth undermined political and historical contingency). Thus, “zones of containment” are social boundaries where discursive tensions exist.

Vancouver Poetry Conference, 1963

Two years into Tish’s first editorial period, Vancouver became the centre of poetry in North America, at least for the weeks surrounding the Vancouver Poetry Conference in July and August 1963. Olson, Duncan, Creeley, Allen Ginsberg, and Denise Levertov were some of the prominent poets among the over sixty people who were involved in readings, lectures, workshops, and discussions.119 Having strengthened his associations with San Francisco poets and seen the dedicated enthusiasm and affinity between his students and the American poets, Tallman started to organize the landmark conference. Donald Allen put Tallman in touch with Olson, Ginsberg, Snyder, and Philip Whalen, with each of whom Tallman initiated and sustained personal and professional correspondence.120 For example, Tallman and Ginsberg nurtured a lifelong correspondence and professional friendship, starting with Tallman’s funding of Ginsberg’s travels from India to Japan to Vancouver in July 1963. Tallman was determined to have these poets in Vancouver. He also cared deeply for the friendships that he created with many of them. His correspondence reveals both the amicableness and collegiality of his relationship with the avant-garde poets.121 For example, Ginsberg, en route to Vancouver, met up with Gary Snyder in Japan and sent Tallman a postcard: “Running around Kyoto seeing full moons and

119 Modeled on the Vancouver Poetry Conference, The Berkeley Poetry Conference in 1965 similarly brought together the most active and influential thinkers and poets. Fred Wah, Tish poet and UBC student, attended the Vancouver conference and created an archive of taped readings and discussions, “Vancouver Poetry Conference & Miscellaneous Readings/Lectures.” Fred Wah Poetry Recordings, available on-line at the Slought Foundation. Also, see Vancouver Poetry Conference materials, Contemporary Literature Collection, SFU.

120 Allen wrote to Tallman: “I wrote to him [Charles] today quoting what you said about the local scene developing there….why don’t you write him?” 14 March 1961. Allen suggested inviting Whalen to the Vancouver Poetry Conference, 11 July 1963. In spring 1962, Creeley accepted a teaching post at UBC throughout June, and Tallman and Creeley started to organize the Conference. 12 June 1962; 26 June 1962. All above correspondence is from Warren Tallman Fonds, Contemporary Literature Collection, SFU.

121 Tallman’s archives include particularly intimate correspondence with Robert Creeley, Jack Spicer, Robert Duncan, and Allen Ginsberg.
temples and did a little sitting with Snyder in his meditation hall... Roy Keoka [sic] here too."

This postcard reveals the closeness and connectedness of the west coast poetry circuit. Tallman as a facilitator and educator brought together Kiyooka and Ginsberg and, as part of the larger network of poets on the west coast, they became citizens of the “pacific nation.”

The conference consisted of discussions and roundtables with the visiting poets over the course of three weeks. For example, on July 26, Creeley, Duncan, and Ginsberg discussed Olson’s *Projective Verse* in relation to the page and to the physical act of writing; on August 5, Duncan delivered a talk entitled “A Life in Poetry”; and, on August 14, Duncan, Ginsberg, and Olson lead a discussion entitled “Duende, Muse & Angel.” Ginsberg read from *Kaddish* and *Howl.* The recorded lectures and discussions are extensive; however, what can be said is that Olson’s poetics were central, as were the philosophies of Whitehead. For example, in a discussion between Duncan, Ginsberg, and Creeley, Duncan clarified Whiteheadian philosophy when he re-iterated poetry as a “cosmic event”:

> the human being is seen not as a being but as an event, as a focus. Your “I” then, by the way, changes from being here, to another “I” who represents the “I” of the cosmos and the only “I” of the cosmos that you know at all is yourself.

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122 Postcard from Ginsberg to Tallman, 9 July 1963. Warren Tallman Fonds, Contemporary Literature Collection, SFU.

123 Ginsberg’s ties with Tallman endured his lifetime. In 1986, Ginsberg wrote a letter of support for a possible lectureship for Tallman: “Warren Tallman of UBC is one of the greatest teachers of literature I’ve ever encountered. I’ve followed his work – seen his effects on students – for almost a quarter century, and am still grateful and thrilled at his presence in academia.” Letter from Ginsberg, 1 August 1986. Warren Tallman Fonds, Contemporary Literature Collection, SFU. Ginsberg’s role at the Vancouver Poetry Conference was significant because it marked the concrete presence of the beat ethos in British Columbia. Similarly, Ginsberg’s involvement in an academic institution, as well as his collaboration with Black Mountain poetry, demonstrates the fusion, integration and crossing of boundaries that took place in poetry and at UBC. For instance, Robert Creeley’s seminal essay *Contexts of Poetry* (*Audit*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1968) was in fact a dialogue between himself and Ginsberg that took place at the Vancouver Conference.

124 This lecture was on the subject of Spanish poet Garcia Lorca’s theory of the Duende, a dark, mysterious force in which Olson was particularly interested.

125 Vancouver Poetry Conference, Ginsberg, Duncan, Creeley, 26 July 1963. Tape #38, 14. Contemporary Literature Collection, SFU.
Whitehead and Olson were no longer abstract and academic concepts taught in Tallman’s poetry class, but became concrete in the form of a dialogue between their initial practitioners in the medium of poetry. This particular conversation meandered through all sorts of philosophical, aesthetic, and spiritual debates. In one particularly broad-sweeping passage, Duncan talks about ancient cultural exchange between India and the Mediterranean as a poetic event or a wave, where masses of people exchanged myths and ideas (he talks about Buddha, Isis, and Maya). He then suggests that these waves of exchange were also now occurring in the “insane Pacific coast and California’s especially…weird cults of one kind or another.”

He narrates a disjointed tale where the “Englishman” was in search of the “source” and so he went to “America” where he found the “Indian” which, in his mind, became the “primitive” Greek. Duncan summarizes that the “Indian and the primitive Greek became one for us and came down, now I’m talking about the Indian of the southwest and the Maya.” Duncan’s free-flow reads as a confusing and nonsensical narrative because he collapsed history’s specificity into grand waves of human movement, or cosmic events. He seems to be suggesting that historic human movement in search of the “source” relates more to a search for the nature of human subjectivity and existence than to specific historically-constituted economic conditions and drives. Duncan’s approach to history as waves, myths, and cosmic events, while embracing post-modern methodologies of meta-narratives and inter-textuality, nonetheless presents itself as a distinctly European position where the “us” is referring to the European settlers of North America to whom the “other” still remains the “Indian.”

Duncan’s adherence to Whiteheadian philosophy of organism has possibilities

126 Ibid., 44.
127 Ibid., 44.
as a framework for understanding the west coast milieu. Duncan claims that he and Ginsberg are both "muddled" because both of them draw from many sources:

I do have to, in order to even find my way, become flooded with things that culturally wouldn't make sense except they make sense. Throw away the culture and find out that they're all part of some human thing and not just write from one centre.\(^{128}\)

I think this idea of pluralism can apply to Vancouver in that there were many diverse sources for emerging poets and artists, including Olson, John Cage, and Marshall McLuhan.

The Vancouver Poetry Conference raised philosophical issues of meaning-making and subjectivity, not only in public discussion, but also in private classes with poetry students. Creeley, Ginsberg, and Olson co-taught English 410: Poetry Writing and Criticism, a course offered by permission only to English majors and focused on verse forms and contemporary poetic criticism. Forty-eight students worked closely with the instructors, many of whom were active in *Tish* or independent emerging writers, including, David Bromige, Judith Copithorne, David Cull, Bob Hogg, Dan MacLeod, Peter Auxier, George Bowering, Dave Dawson, James Reid, Allen Graves, Gladys Hindmarch, Sam Perry, and Fred Wah.\(^{129}\) The effects of this course cannot be measured, however, it is likely that the students were exposed to and trained in the poetics of open form, including Olson's projective verse, Whitehead's process philosophy and Black Mountain poetics of language and sound. When Sam Perry started to make films, he did not use Olson as a distant referent or an academic model. He was Olson's student, part of the Black Mountain/beat/San Francisco lineage. The course was also responsible for securing connections between poets on the west coast, thus actively producing and reproducing the cultural practices of the region.

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\(^{128}\) Ibid., 45.

\(^{129}\) Summer Session Calendar 1963, University of British. Class List, English 410, 24 July – 16 August 1963, English Department, UBC.
example, Fred Wah maintained correspondence with both Creeley and Olson throughout the 1960s and when Wah went to teach a poetry seminar at SUNY in 1965, it was Olson who made recommendations for his reading list.¹³⁰

The Vancouver Poetry Conference marked the energy, seriousness, and possibilities of poetry in Vancouver and on the west coast. UBC and *Tish* were considered to be legitimate and exciting poetry-producing localities. All over the city, poetic practices exploded. In 1963, bill bissett started *blew ointment magazine*, a little magazine that was dedicated to visual and concrete poetry, which in 1967, spawned *blew ointment press*.¹³¹ While *Tish* was written from the English department at UBC, *blew ointment* was the production of the “downtown bohemian set” who were either involved with the Vancouver School of Art or were independent emerging or established poets and artists.¹³² *Periwinkle Press* was a downtown publishing collective also established in 1963 and, in its one year of operation, it printed three small books, one book, and four broadsides.¹³³ Roy Kiyooka published *Kyoto Airs* (1964) with *Periwinkle* and artist Takao Tanabe did the layout and design for a majority of the covers.¹³⁴ *blew ointment* and *Periwinkle* were not only significant for their role in supporting avant-garde and experimental literature and poetry, but also as instrumental sites of the cross-fertilization of poetry and art. By the mid 1960s, *blew

¹³⁰ Olson suggested that Wah assign *New Empire* by Brooks Adams, letter from Olson to Wah, 25 Oct 1965, Fred Wah Papers, Contemporary Literature Collection, SFU. See Fred Wah papers for his communication with Creeley and Olson. Frank Davey and Robert Duncan also maintained a close personal and professional correspondence, Frank Davey papers, Contemporary Literature Collection, SFU.

¹³¹ bill bissett is a visual artist and poet, working in the media of collage, assemblage, painting, drawing, concrete poetry, and sound poetry. He went to UBC for two years and, in addition to heading *blew ointment*, he was also active in starting the Mandan Ghetto (1967-8), a venue for experimental art forms. For a discussion of his early poetic practice, see Warran Tallman, “Wonder Merchants,” in *Writing Life*, 64-6.


¹³³ Geoff Hancock, *Published in Canada: A history of small presses* (manuscript, unpublished, 1967), 14. Contemporary Literature Collection, SFU.

¹³⁴ Tanabe trained as a painter in Winnipeg and New York and studied in Japan in 1959. In Vancouver, his work was diverse, from lyrical abstract landscape paintings to hard-edge canvases.
ointment included the work of visual artists such Tanabe, Gary Lee-Nova, Ian Wallace, and Dallas Selman who explored the relationship between sound, language, and visuality.

blew ointment and Periwinkle brought Olsonian poetics into the wider Vancouver literary circle where it fused with non-academic poetic practices. Without a doctrinal adherence to projective or proprioceptive poetry, blew ointment poets embraced personal narration and instantism as a means of expressing the poetic experience. Beat mysticism and myth took expression in verse, drawing, and visual poetry. Al Neil’s excerpts in blew ointment from his Book of Changes consists of detailed narratives of drug use, raising another characteristic of west coast isolation and disengagement – escapism and alternate existence through drugs.135 Perry’s West Coast Tantras and Tibetan Love Song (blew ointment, September and August 1964) called for spiritual freedom, romanticizing Asian-Pacific cultures. These practices continued “nostalgia without memory,” a practice that I have argued as inherently political and one which implicated the west coast in the larger racial, economic, and cultural power relations of North American cold war politics.

These two presses were also sites of marginalized and non-conformist practices. For example, Judith Copithorne’s verse and visual poetry were profoundly concerned with gender and sexuality and, while she adhered to notions of “universal music,” her exploration of gender challenged the norm of male sexuality. For example, in September 1964, a large part of blew ointment was dedicated to her

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135 bill bissett and Al Neil were subjects of an exhibition with George Herms and Jess entitled Rezoning: Collage and Assemblage (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1989), in which the four artists were representative of the west coast practices of collage, rooted in dada and surrealism. bissett and Neil were not seen within the context of Vancouver’s poetry collectives, but rather as visual artists of the west coast. What I am arguing here is that the poetic activity coming from Tallman and UBC initiated the growth of Vancouver poetic activity such as blew ointment which then acted a support for visual practices. In other words, visual practices of the mid-sixties cannot be the starting point for Vancouver art history - it must start earlier with the poetic practices of the San Francisco Renaissance.
poetry and prose. In *Sea of Change*, she narrates the story of Hanna, from five years old “dressed in her distant aunt’s long ago party clothes” to womanhood, when she “learned to search her own ocean deeps.” The girl’s journey of growth unfolds in Vancouver (“a once silent Indian forest now her city home”). Her adolescence is marked by her face submerged in the Pacific Ocean: “life water, slither of sea weed, elemental, first smell of salt,” and her passage to adulthood is signified by her walk along a warm beach “toward the morning sun she could see the brightly sun-lit glass and slivered white towers of downtown.” The narrative connects Hanna’s body and senses to Vancouver, a locality defined by its natural boundaries of ocean and forest and its history as Indigenous territorial land. As with Dave Dawson’s *tentative coastlines*, Copithorne embraces the proprioceptive notion of the city “speaking through” the poet, thus also enacting “nostalgia without memory.” However, it is not male sexuality as a pre-requisite for spiritual enlightenment that is evoked, but rather the process of becoming a woman and the growing consciousness of sexuality.

Copithorne wrote frequently on female sexuality and the social constraints of femininity:

> Music sometimes says to me,  
> In its sweetness, There are  
> so many things which could  
> have been. Encumbered as I am  
> with sewing thread and old shoes  
> how can I live on an island …  
> …or know a wilderness  
> or my own survival alone.\(^{138}\)

Copithorne’s poetry, which will become significant later for visual artist Audrey Capel Doray, addressed women’s lives unlived, the female body, as well as notions of beauty.

\(^{137}\) Ibid., n. pag.  
\(^{138}\) Ibid., n. pag.
Similarly, *Periwinkle* was a site of “other” cultural production in 1964, namely, Kiyooka’s first book of poems, *Kyoto Airs*. As I have asserted, in attempting to create bohemia, west coast artists did not necessarily emulate French modernist models of the *flâneur*, but rather embodied the idea of the “spiritual traveler” who remained physically static in front of the mountains, ocean, and raw materials to instead embark on imaginary or mythic flights of poetry. Kiyooka’s painting *The Bridge* alluded to Olsonian notions of cosmic energy vectors and connections in consciousness. However, the rigid lines and composition of the painting do not seem to emulate the freedom of spiritual movement implied in Vancouver poetry. Therefore, while the space of cross-fertilization is one which encompasses both the verbal and visual, it is not without its disjunctures, hybrids, and fusion of forms. In “The Living of Modern Life – in Canada,” Charlotte Townsend-Gault argues that Kiyooka did embody aspects of the *flâneur* because he traveled through and across artistic media, discourses, languages, countries, and neighbourhoods. Like Appadurai who acknowledges the social formation of neighbourhoods, Townsend-Gault writes: “the *flâneur* goes back to the neighbourhood as site for the construction of self.” In Vancouver, Kiyooka lived downtown in Strathcona on the edges of Chinatown, physically and discursively marking a “zone of containment” of Chinese, Japanese, and so-called “other” groups.

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139 For a biography of Roy Kiyooka, see Roy Miki, “Inter-face: Roy Kiyooka’s Writing,” in *Collapse: the view from here*, no. 2, 51-61.
140 The editors of *All Amazed for Roy Kiyooka* similarly identify the tension between poetics and painting in Kiyooka’s work, writing that the poetics of Creeley and Olson “seems at odds with the ordered restraint and abstraction of the paintings.” Introduction, 8.
141 Olsonian poetics represented a major axis of aesthetic practice and became a monolithic opposite to Greenbergian formalism. In this sense, there existed a polarization between the two systems, a binary which certainly acted upon art production in Vancouver, such as in the operation of “nostalgia without memory” on the west coast. In the following chapter, I will analyze the effects of these two hegemonic forces on avant-garde production.
Where *Tish* marked out a neighbourhood constructed in relation to American academic modernism and elite avant-garde practices, *Periwinkle* was supported by downtown neighbourhood collectives. However, these two neighbourhoods were not opposed but rather formed in relation to each other. They bled into each other, shared collaborations, and further defined and strengthened each other. Townsend-Gault explains that, for Kiyooka, meaning and "authenticity" were most likely to be found in locality and local discourse.\(^{143}\) Kiyooka went to Japan for the first time in 1963 (where he saw Ginsberg and Snyder), an experience that grounded his art and poetry in notions of cultural (mis)translation and (re)interpretation. He was both Japanese and Canadian, belonging to both and neither, and was looking for a "Japan he [could] have in Canada."\(^{144}\)

Upon his return to Vancouver, Kiyooka attended the Vancouver Poetry Conference where notions of myth, Whiteheadian "being," and Olsonian "instantism" were foremost in the discussions among Creeley, Olson, Duncan, and Ginsberg. Roy Miki writes, "what Kiyooka chose, along with Barthes and Creeley, was a consciousness and recognition not only of the world, but of the meanings...of that world."\(^{145}\) Kiyooka was a painter, photographer, poet, and art teacher at the Vancouver School of Art and the University of British Columbia and his movement towards both image and language was what he termed "inter-face." This is an evocative term in conceptualizing the formation of Vancouver and west coast avant-garde practices as it points to the indeterminate space between language and vision where an artist is driven to create both a sound and an image.\(^{146}\) This inter-face or

\(^{143}\) Townsend-Gault, 14.

\(^{144}\) Ibid., 14.

\(^{145}\) Sheryl Conkelton, "Roy Kiyooka: ‘The sad and Glad Tidings of the Floating World...’" *All Amazed For Roy Kiyooka*, 114.

\(^{146}\) Roy Miki, "Inter-face: Roy Kiyooka’s Writing," in *Collapse* 2, 55.
cross-over zone is the space of cross-fertilization. In Vancouver, it was bolstered by individuals who shared the “inter-face,” such as Al Neil, bissett, and Tanabe. By the mid to late 1960s, the “inter-face” had transformed Vancouver into a centre of the visual avant-garde.
CHAPTER TWO

Astronauts of Inner Space: 
The Annual Festival of the Contemporary Arts and the Cross-Fertilization of 
Poetry and Art, 1961-65

No one can have an idea once he really starts listening.

- John Cage

Imagine a world before the beginning was the word.

- Stan Brakhage

Environments are invisible. Their ground rules, pervasive structure, and 
overall patterns elude easy perception.

- Marshall McLuhan

In the 1960s, North American universities were often sites of vanguard and 
radical cultural practices. As I have been arguing, on the west coast during this 
period, the culture of poetry was at the heart of an emerging avant-garde. Daniel 
Belgrad asserts that North American post-war vanguard art was anti-intellectual and 
anti-traditional. He refers to the movement against the institutionalization of culture 
as the “culture of spontaneity” and argues that it was an avant-garde strategy that 
sought to counter “corporate liberalism” by offering an alternative mode of 
humanism. Neither a practice of mass culture nor of “high” culture, spontaneity was

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1 Cage quoted in Sylvia Harrison, Pop Art and the Origins of Post-Modernism (Cambridge: Cambridge 
n. pag.
4 Daniel Belgrad, The Culture of Spontaneity: Improvisation and the Arts in Postwar America, 
a third alternative that was rooted in the metaphysics of embodiment. Like Alfred
North Whitehead's process philosophy, the culture of spontaneity was anti-Cartesian
in its union of mind and body and in its dissolution of the distinction between subject
and object:

The basic attributes of this alternative metaphysics can be
summarized as intersubjectivity and body-mind holism. Corporate
liberalism embraced an ontology and epistemology of objectivity,
which was the basis of its advanced technological mastery of nature. Against
this, spontaneity posed intersubjectivity, in which 'reality' was understood to
emerge through a conversational dynamic.\(^5\)

In addition to Whitehead, Belgrad also considers Marshall McLuhan to be a central
figure in the culture of spontaneity. On the west coast, McLuhan's ideas on "acoustic
space" resonated with both Whiteheadian notions of holism and Charles Olson's open
form poetics.\(^6\) McLuhan was a key figure in this paradigm because of his incisive
critique of the demise of American intellectual life into what Belgrad called a
"corporate-bureaucratic ant farm." As Richard Cavell argues in *McLuhan in Space: A
Cultural Geography*, McLuhan's critique led to the post-war rallying cries for
"awakened critical faculties" – cries that were answered by artists such as John Cage,
Charles Olson, and Allen Ginsberg.

Belgrad's conception of the culture of spontaneity is fruitful in thinking about
Vancouver as a part of a west coast avant-garde where dialogue, conversation, and
inter-penetration of forms were central modes of creativity. However, the history of

\(^5\) Ibid., 5.
\(^6\) In *McLuhan in Space: A Cultural Geography* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), Richard
Cavell explains that McLuhan's studies in communication were ultimately spatial theories. For
example, McLuhan's argument that media was an extension of human beings necessarily involved a
spatial understanding of technology, social relations, and subjectivity. One of McLuhan's central
concerns was the spatialization of language in which the vocal and oral dimensions of language are
heightened and emphasized in technological communication media. McLuhan referred to the multi-
perspectival and simultaneous "ear space" of modernity as "acoustic space." In relation to the west
coast where Olson's kinetic poetry and *Tish*'s vocal poetry represented avant-garde discourses,
"acoustic space" was a philosophically consistent concept. For McLuhan in relation to visual poetry in
Vancouver, see 136-8.
spontaneity that I am constructing is in tension with that of Belgrad mainly because avant-garde expressions in Vancouver were not as rigidly anti-intellectual as Belgrad describes. The University of British Columbia not only provided a venue for early avant-garde practices but also enabled their development through creating an open, diverse, and internationally engaged intellectual milieu. As an institutional symbol of knowledge and tradition, the university made possible the culture of spontaneity in Vancouver. In addition to the Vancouver Poetry Conference in 1963, UBC also hosted the annual Festival of the Contemporary Arts (1961-71). The Festivals consisted of local, west coast and international poets, dancers, musicians, filmmakers, and visual artists and played an essential role in the formation of the avant-garde in Vancouver. Furthermore, as I will argue in this chapter, the Festivals helped to construct the specificity of both the west coast and Vancouver avant-garde, mainly through the dissemination of particular discourses and aesthetics that operated across media. I am calling this philosophical interconnection of media the cross-fertilization of poetry and art, specifically referring to the foundational role of open form poetics in dance, film, happenings, and visual art.

The cross-fertilization of poetry and art is not simply the sharing of a common aesthetic by a poem and an art work (dance, sculpture, painting, or music) or the visual imitation of a poetic practice. Cross-fertilization is the space in which both the verbal and the visual are created. As discussed in Chapter One, the spatial consideration of poetics forms the central axis of the arguments put forth by Christian Moraru, namely that the spatial discourses of a poem are twofold: on space and of

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7 Cavell also diverges from Belgrad's formulation, specifically in relation to Belgrad's placement of McLuhan within the paradigm of the culture of spontaneity. Cavell asserts that McLuhan was an intellectual-artist, a hybrid for which Belgrad's formulation does not allow, see Cavell, 101-3.
For example, projective verse depends both on the laws of poetry as Charles Olson outlined them (principle, kinetics, process) and on the poem’s topographical layout. The projective poem is therefore both a discourse on the space (inner, perceptual) of the poet and it is an iconically organized field on the page (visual). Because the inner space of the poet is a dynamic succession of experiences, the poem must be kinetic. Its movement is derived from the lines and breaths as laid-out visually. Therefore, the semantics and language of the poem are structured by the visual and the visual is determined by the content of the poem. This “inter-face” between language (sounds) and visuality is the space of cross-fertilization. I am arguing that the production of the space of cross-fertilization on the west coast was a consistent aesthetic project of the avant-garde, not least of all in Vancouver where Olson, Robert Creeley, and Robert Duncan were profoundly significant poetic figures. The space of cross-fertilization did not just reside in poetic production but also in projective forms of dance, film, music, and performance. Between 1961 and 1965, the diverse practices of John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Stan Brakhage, Marshall McLuhan, and Bruce Conner embodied aspects of cross-fertilization and were featured at the Festival of the Contemporary Arts.

This chapter continues to rely on Richard Cándida Smith’s four major insights into the west coast avant-garde outlined in Chapter One. Furthermore, I argue that the specificity of the west coast lies in three main characteristics: 1) as a transnational cultural entity that stood as a counter-narrative to the national imperatives of both the

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9 Briefly summarized, Cándida Smith’s four key characteristics of west coast avant-garde discourses included: 1) the sacred, or the cosmic, was privileged over the profane; 2) the private inner-life of an individual related more to cosmology than to psycho-social imperatives; 3) freedom was found through human difference not conformity; and, 4) art was about process and response (dialogue) rather than a communication of a personal perception. Utopia and Dissent: Art, Poetry and Politics in California (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 141.
United States and Canada, or an “imaginary pacific nation”; 2) as an embodiment of utopia, specifically in the university setting; and, 3) as having a distinct avant-garde whose practices were rooted in the cross-fertilization of poetry and art. While the first aspect of the west coast is an on-going process of identification, the second characteristic held true for a finite period of time in the 1960s. The university posited as a utopia seems to be a contradictory statement considering that universities are bureaucratic institutions and wellsprings of intellectualism, both of which are the nemesis of spontaneity. However, in the case of the University of British Columbia and later, Simon Fraser University, the university was understood by people like B.C. Binning, Alvin Balkind, Warren Tallman, and Robin Blaser as a “utopian project.”

For them, the culture of spontaneity flourished at the university and was not contained by it. Poetry as a strategy of personal meaning-making was a radical gesture against history, and for a moment, the university ceased to be a bastion of tradition and history and became instead a site of endless possibilities.

The physical space of the University of British Columbia transformed dramatically in the post-war years with over one hundred buildings erected during this period. President Norman MacKenize (1944-1962) enlisted Sharp, Thompson, Berwick, and Pratt as the University architects and together they constructed the concept, design, and plan for the physical expansion of the university.

In 1956, W.A.C. Bennett’s Social Credit provincial government allocated one million dollars

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10 Stephen Collis, *Companions and Horizons: An anthology of SFU poetry*, 13. While Collis is referring to SFU’s establishment in 1965 as a utopian project and considers UBC to be a traditional institution, I am arguing that in the early 1960s, prior to the founding of SFU, the Festival of the Contemporary Arts aimed to transform the UBC campus into a utopia.

11 See Chapter Three for an analysis of utopianism in relation to UBC and SFU.

12 For an overview of the physical and “ideological” development of UBC, see Lara Tomaszewska, “Post-war reconstruction,” in *Recovering the University Fabric*, (project of the UBC Departments of Art History, Visual Art & Theory, Architecture, and Geography) http://www.library.ubc.ca/archives/u_fabric/index.html.
per year for ten years to the UBC expansion program, funding that paid for the Buchanan Arts Building, the Medical Building, and student residences. In 1955, the Leon and Thea Koerner Foundation was established with a one million dollar endowment to fund projects in the fields of culture, health, and welfare.

President John MacDonald (1962-1967) continued Mackenzie's drive for physical expansion particularly in the area of financial development. In 1963, he presented the "MacDonald Report" in which he called for the establishment of a financial commission to drive what he called academic "free enterprise." The campus newspaper The Ubyssey consistently reported on MacDonald's ambitions and while his entrepreneurial spirit prompted much needed development such as the 1964 architectural competition for the design of the new Student Union Building, he was also criticized for his fiscal politicking and for alienating the student body. For example, in a cartoon from February 19, 1965, Jeff Wall commented on UBC's financial pandering to Bennett. A disproportionately large bust of Bennett looms on top of a commemorative pedestal in front of which a preacher stands on his soap box. The plinth reads "The William Andrew Cecil Bennett Student Union Building, Est. 1967," while the orator righteously addresses students: "Brothers – Always remember: wherever you go...the great Almighty is always looking down upon you!"

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13 See Chapter One for a brief history of Bennett's Social Credit government.
14 The Koerner Foundation was significant in the physical, academic, and social development of the campus. Certainly, the Arts faculty, including Fine Arts and the Festival of the Contemporary Arts benefited from its funding. In 1963, Culture and Creative Arts received $29,400 in funding; $31,650 in 1964; and, $28,150 in 1965. Norman Mackenzie Fonds, Box 179-180, University Archives, University of British Columbia. The annual budget for the Festival of the Contemporary Arts was approximately $3,500. B.C. Binning Fonds, University Archives.
15 The Ubyssey, 28 Jan 1963, 3.
16 Wall was an Art History student at UBC between 1964 and 1970 when he completed his MA thesis entitled Berlin Dada and the Notion of Context. Between Sept 1964 and March 1966, he was a staff cartoonist for The Ubyssey and contributed weekly cartoons during the academic year. His cartoons dealt with university, local, and provincial politics as well as social issues affecting students, such as sexual politics and drugs. His cartoons also addressed contemporary academic and cultural ideas including literature, film, and popular culture. The cartoons not only reveal Wall's satirical bent, but also the extent of his early engagement with social critique and Marxist idealism, practices that he continued in his graduate work.
Accompanying Wall’s cartoon is an irreverent editorial by Ron Riter musing on the double-edged sword of UBC expansion. On a predominantly anti-Bennett campus, students felt that they would have to accept the financial control of the provincial government in order to enrich student life with improved facilities. The tensions between authority and student empowerment played out at UBC as they did in varying ways throughout campuses in North America.

The development of UBC’s “ideological” space did not necessarily match the growing institutional bureaucracy of the university. While funding increased and facilities grew increasingly bigger, the Arts faculty was home to small groups of writers and artists, including Tish poets, student journalists, and artists such as Wall, who were engaged in the beginning of a critique of institutions and/or capitalist consumerism. With the growth of the university made possible through financial support from the government and private endowments, faculty members had the space and vitality to expand their intellectual practices, if they so chose. Tallman, Balkind, and Binning took advantage of the fertile period of expansion and nurtured the growth of a social, cultural, and intellectual milieu that would enable students such as Wall to develop their own parameters for local critique. 17

The Festival of the Contemporary Arts, 1961-71


17 In Abstract Art Against Autonomy: Infection, Resistance, and Cure Since the 60s (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), Mark Cheetham analyzes Ian Wallace’s photographic series The Idea of the University (1990) and writes that Wallace understands the idea of the university to be an “abstraction [that] must play out in specific circumstances in interactions among specific people and places,” 139. This analysis parallels my assertion that in the early 1960s, the cultural and artistic formations at UBC, including Tish and the Festival of the Contemporary Arts, were the result of a specific set of individuals, their beliefs and their interactions – a milieu in which Wallace himself became an active participant in 1965.
together the Situationists, Beats, and Black Mountain writers, the collection included 17 manifestoes, 28 poems, articles, letters, and a film script. Allen Ginsberg, Robert Creeley, and Marshall McLuhan were featured in the collection, a grouping that had taken various forms in Vancouver both at the Vancouver Poetry Conference and also at the Festival of the Contemporary Arts. They were "astronauts of inner space" because of their philosophical and aesthetic preoccupation with perception and inner perception (proprioception) as well as a Whiteheadian interest in the metaphysics of being. Language, the body, and sensual experience were entities through which humans express the cosmic force of living. For the "astronauts," they were inner fields; that is, they were manifested through cosmic and inner drives and only perceived externally. Language, dance, film, and visual art, therefore, were to be understood as "occasions" of the universe rather than as descriptive forms of external experience. The Festival of the Contemporary Arts was also a collection of the "astronauts of inner space" where the poetics of Olson, Whitehead, McLuhan, and Cage were foundational for film, dance, and visual art practices.

B.C. Binning, founder of the Festival of the Contemporary Arts and chair of the Fine Arts committee, joined the UBC School of Architecture in 1949 and acted as founding Head of the Department of Fine Arts from 1955-1968. In an interview with The Ubyssey's William Littler in 1963, Binning explained why "brushing up against the arts" in the Festival of the Contemporary Arts was a critical component of...
university life. Binning understood the university experience as one connected to the contemporary moment, not only within the immediate environment but with also within the world at large. By the nature of the academic environment, the university strove to be in the forefront of research and thinking across disciplines and its cultural dimension similarly needed to be up to the moment. Unlike New York and Paris that already benefited from infrastructure in the arts, Binning asserted that in Vancouver "we have to create our own cultural environment, enrich it ourselves, and make it a part of our university experience." However, in aiming to create a local culture of the contemporary arts, Binning did not emphasize local production in the Festivals. On the contrary, he suggested that through the importation of new ideas, the local environment could be enriched. Thus, the Festivals consisted of American, international, and non-local Canadian artists whose practices were imported to UBC and, in many cases, adapted to the specificity of the new context.

In February 1961, under Binning’s direction and with the sponsorship of the Koerner Foundation and the Office of the President, the first Festival of the Contemporary Arts took place. In 1962, fine arts on campus continued to strengthen with the arrival of Alvin Balkind as curator of the Fine Arts Gallery and with the completion of the new Arts Centre (Lasserre Building). Balkind arrived in Vancouver in 1955 and set up one of the city’s first contemporary avant-garde galleries, the New Design Gallery. In 1958, he was a founding member of the Arts Club of Vancouver and in 1962 he started his tenure as the curator of the Fine Arts

20 William Littler, "Brush up against the Arts," in The Ubyssey (1 Feb 1963), 4-5.
21 Ibid., 4.
22 The Lasserre Building was originally conceived of as an “arts centre” by Binning and his colleagues in Fine Arts. Designed by Thompson, Berwick and Pratt, the four storey building had a mandate: “let all creative arts be brought together, let all buildings face into a court where students can interchange ideas, let Fine Arts, Architecture and Planning be united in one building.” Building description, Spring 1962, vertical file, Fine Arts Library. University of British Columbia.
Gallery at UBC, a post he held until 1973. Balkind immediately became involved with the Festival organization and was passionate about its commitment to raising local awareness on international contemporary art and culture. He explained:

> The major arts undergraduate courses are slanted towards the total history of the Western World; and many have a disconcerting way of assuming that the modern world ended about 1950...often earlier. Yet there is nothing more explosive and more profoundly meaningful than the directions that the world has taken in the past ten or twelve years. Unless these dynamic forces are looked at and thought about by us, there exists a real danger that our intellects will develop in a lop-sided, stunted manner, always looking backward, always judging on the basis of dead or dying philosophies.

Balkind was articulating the cultural and philosophical shifts that took place in the post-war period, namely the backlash against romanticism and humanism and challenges to cultural and societal tradition. Balkind called on UBC students as well as the Vancouver public to join the movement to carve out innovative and alternative strategies of living. Like the “culture of spontaneity,” the Festival of the Contemporary Arts in Vancouver included diverse aesthetics, including poetry, jazz, painting, and collage, and a particular concern for kinetic art, sound, and movement, or the *process* of art-making. John Cage, Stan Brakhage, Marshall McLuhan, and Bruce Conner were each participants in the Festivals and their practices represented what I am arguing were some of the key discourses of the emerging Vancouver avant-garde. Each one represents a case study in this chapter and, reflecting Binning’s mandate to import contemporary ideas, my discussion will primarily focus on non-local artistic practices that would come to be adapted by local visual artists in the mid-1960s.

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23 See Chapter Three for a detailed analysis of Balkind’s critical curatorial practice and his role as a profoundly influential educator and art critic in Vancouver in the 1960s.


25 Throughout this thesis, I argue that American modernism, specifically open form poetics, was a foundational source for the development of the avant-garde in Vancouver. Furthermore, I also assert
John Cage

The aesthetics of John Cage were instrumental from the inception of the Festival of the Contemporary Arts. The inaugural Festival in 1961 included his music in a dance program by San Francisco dancer Ann Halprin. Cage himself was present at the 1962 and 1966 Festivals and his aesthetics had a major place in the formation of a west coast avant-garde, specifically in relation to Black Mountain language practices and notions of embodiment. The first Festival of the Contemporary Arts, February 6-11, included twenty-eight events of music, jazz, poetry, paintings, theatre, and dance. "Welcome and Think!" was the slogan urging students, faculty, and the Vancouver public to participate. Although international in scope, the Festival was oriented towards west coast practices. John Crown, Californian pianist and head of music department of University of Southern California; James Broughton, California filmmaker, poet and west coast experimentalist; and Robert Duncan were among the Festival’s first invitees. Local contributions included a lecture on architecture by Arthur Erickson and a Cinema 16 anthology of film entitled "Beat, Square and Cool."26 A highlight of the Festival was the performance and lecture by Halprin. Her dance was based on improvisation and also incorporated the spoken word, including poetry.27 Halprin wanted to free dance from choreography just as projective poets

that the role of American expatriates in Vancouver, including Balkind and Tallman, was pivotal in creating an experimental and critical art milieu. However, I want to argue for Vancouver as maintaining Canadian specificity within this influx of American (and international) ideas. While American intellectuals brought the radicalism of New Poetry, they also gained from the Canadian venue in which their personal politics could be openly expressed and for which they would not be persecuted. In this sense, the cultural climate at UBC can be understood as reciprocal where non-local cultural figures could practice their dissenting art and politics and where young local artists could benefit from the newness and criticality of the artistic and intellectual milieu.


27 For a review of Halprin’s performance and lecture at the Festival, see The Ubyssey (2 Feb 1961), 2.
wanted to free sound from language. For Olson, the poem had to be as kinetic as the instant of its writing and, in opposition to traditional dance, Halprin’s movements were instant, spontaneous, and an expression of inner experience. A reviewer in the *Vancouver Province* explained Halprin’s performance:

> the philosophy of movement for its own sake, sounds for theirs, and objects for theirs; the element of improvisation captured and directed into a form, and the freedom of the individual clearly expressed.... the ‘music’ for all her dances is an extension of earlier experiments, along with those of John Cage: sound tracks of amplified natural sounds taken from her environment.\(^{28}\)

Halprin’s dance workshops in San Francisco were a significant site for the dissemination of instantism. She was particularly informed by the practices of John Cage.

> Cage was a central figure for the post-war American avant-garde, most famously for Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and dancer Merce Cunningham. I am suggesting that on the west coast, Cage’s aesthetics were equally significant, specifically in how they related to the process philosophy of Whitehead and the kinetic art of Olson.\(^{29}\) Vancouver art history has associated Cagean aesthetics with the performance-based work of the late-1960s and variations of Fluxus.\(^{30}\) However, I am referring to an earlier time, to the reception of Cage in Vancouver in the early sixties. In addition to his aesthetics, Cage’s ideas on “freedom” and politics were particularly well-adapted to west coast notions of cultural and political alterity as well as its imagined affinity to the Asia-pacific region. In relation to New York, the west coast

\(^{28}\) "Dancer is Applauded for ‘Birds,’" *Vancouver Province* (11 Feb 1961), n. pag.

\(^{29}\) In this chapter, I aim to establish Cage as a significant figure in the formation of an avant-garde and want to outline his main aesthetic and philosophical concerns. See Chapter Three for a more detailed discussion of Cage in relation to the specificity of visual art practices in Vancouver in the 1960s.

was a different cultural context for the reception of Cage, where notions of freedom and disengagement took on altogether different meanings.  

In line with Black Mountain aesthetics of language, sound for Cage, does not have inherent meaning or signify thought. Rather, sound is “occupied with the performance of its characteristics.” 

Cage wanted music to cease being about the composition of meaning and to instead become about the aesthetics of sound. In other words, where traditional composition has a progression, sequences, patterns, and a narrative, Cagean composition was about the attributes of sound: loudness, length, tone. Thus, under Cage, music went from classical composition of programmatic scores to chance principles of sound. His seminal work 4’33” illustrates his aesthetics, specifically the arbitrary nature of sound, what has been termed the aesthetics of silence or indifference. In 4’33,” first “performed” in 1952, pianist David Tudor raised and lowered the piano keyboard lid for each movement, and after four minutes and thirty-three seconds not a single note had been played. Cage’s piece consisted of three movements of musical silence: 30,” 2’23,” and 1’40” respectively. Within each movement, the silence is a compositional notation so that the ambient noise the audience hears is framed to become the subject of the movement. Thus, the sounds in each movement are everyday noises (coughing, breathing, echoes, shuffles, light buzzes) re-contextualized within a musical composition to have semantic

31 Neither Cándida-Smith in his analysis of poetry and politics in California, nor R. Bruce Elder in The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition of Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, and Charles Olson (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1998) analyze the reception of Cage in the west coast milieu. Due to the scope of this paper, I cannot provide a thorough analysis of Cage’s aesthetics; however, I do want to identify his beliefs and practices that resonated in Vancouver and were adapted by local producers, such as his notions of “freedom,” nature, and his use of Zen, and Dada (see Chapter Three).


33 For a brief history on Cage’s turn from classical to chance composition, see Ian Pepper, “From the ‘Aesthetics of Indifference’ to ‘Negative Aesthetics:’ John Cage and Germany, 1952-1972,” October (82, Fall 1997), 32-3 and Konrad Boehmer, “Chance as Ideology,” trans. Ian Pepper, October (82, Fall 1997), 62-76.
meaning.\textsuperscript{34} In this sense, while they are random, chance noises, they become symbols of sound to illustrate Cage's point. Similar to William Carlos Williams' "no ideas but in things," where objects are about themselves rather than a larger idea, Cage's sounds are meaningless and are not about anything but their own duration and performance. In this way, works within this aesthetic say nothing, are mute, and ultimately meaningless.\textsuperscript{35}

The Fall 1997 issue of \textit{October} is dedicated to new scholarship on Cage and includes music theory, criticism, and reception in both European and American avant-garde contexts.\textsuperscript{36} While North American art institutions have made Cage an iconic figure of the mid-century avant-garde art based on the art historical appropriation of 4'33," Cage has been brought to task in European criticism for the unresolved tensions in his theory and practice. The \textit{October} issue deepens Cage scholarship, initiating a critical discourse around his work that was previously lacking. It also provides insight into the larger international critical debates in the mid to late 1960s around the aesthetics of Cage while likewise proving helpful in locating Vancouver and the west coast within these debates.

\textsuperscript{34} Noel Carroll, "Cage and Philosophy," \textit{Journal of Aesthetics & Art Criticism} (vol. 52, no. 1, winter, 1994), 95.

\textsuperscript{35} The "aesthetics of silence" became a crux of art criticism in the 1960s, specifically with writers like Susan Sontag and Barbara Rose (to be discussed in Chapter Three). Meaningless, chance, and randomness as approaches to art-making opened up new avenues of critical interpretation to practices that included text, simulacra, and montage, for example - practices which were not adequately dealt with by Kantian modes of criticism in the vein of modernist formalism. Of course, chance and randomness in art does not start with Cage. For example, automatism and collage techniques in abstract painting by Pollock or in surrealist compositions also explored notions of chance. However, in surrealist approaches, randomness was linked to psychoanalytic notions of the unconscious and desire, as opposed to Cage who insists that there is no (structural) meaning in chance.

\textsuperscript{36} In 1954, Cage toured Europe with Tudor and in 1958; he attended the Darmstadt summer school in Germany. The Darmstadt School consisted of European avant-garde composers, including Pierre Boulez and Luigi Nono. Cage and his practices did not go un-noticed in Europe; in fact, his work elicited particularly heated response in Germany. By the 1960s, the reception of Cage was included in various European periodicals, three of which are presented in translated form in \textit{October}. In Germany, Theodor Adorno's \textit{Philosophy of Modern Music} conditioned the reception of Cage in a distinctly Marxist manner. Adorno accused European composers who were similar to Cage of "fetishism," claiming that they ignored historical and critical considerations of the development of composition. Ian Pepper, "From the 'Aesthetics of Indifference,' " 35.
In Vancouver – “thousands of miles from history” – a new space opened up for new identities and practices.\(^{37}\) Individual and collective “freedom” could be achieved with the “spiritual raw materials” of the west coast: mountains, ocean, and forest. Concerned with similar discourses around freedom and nature, Konrad Boehmer in “Chance as Ideology” argues that Cage absolved himself of historical obligations through insisting upon the liberation of sounds from music.\(^{38}\) Cage claimed that by allowing sounds to occur by chance, music is “freed” from the “author” and sounds are “freed” from music. Cage likened this musical control to the domination of nature by humans, and through his chance composition, Cage wanted to liberate sounds from human-made systems. For Cage, freedom meant a state of “nature” where systems of domination and control do not exist. Boehmer vehemently rejects Cage’s philosophy, claiming that it is plagued with “unresolved historical antagonisms.”\(^{39}\) For Boehmer, the antagonism in Cage’s work is that Cage suggests that music is not free but that sounds as they occur in “nature” are. Cage uses the principle of chance to signify freedom. In practice, chance is “the marriage of total isolation with the cult of unmediated nature.”\(^{40}\)

The idea that there exists “unmediated nature” within or against which art is produced is a highly problematic assumption because it posits nature as an absolute rather than as a historically-contingent and discursive category. In his written treatise *Silence*, Cage insists that the world is “at no point free of sounds” and for Cage, these sounds also bear the mark of war, oppression, and misery – they are always present

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39 Ibid., 64.
40 Ibid., 70.
and always audible. When music ends and ambient sound replaces it, then these sounds of the world become the substance of the piece. Boehmer argues that Cage gives misery and oppression trans-historical scale and argues that they always exist and it is utopian to pursue their abolition. In this sense, Cage’s notion of freedom and liberation is similar to Duncan’s (and Olson’s) view of history (or rejection of history). For Duncan, the “Indian” and the “primitive Greek” are one and the same, both human trajectories of subjectivity. Cage, in a similar type of historical collapse, understands nature in a transcendental way. Boehmer writes:

Cage, who uses the term “freedom” unreflectively, surrenders to the rule of what seems to him to guarantee this freedom, namely, the contingencies of nature that are worthy of contemplation because they are not constituents of mental conceptions. In Marx’s *German Ideology*, what Cage demands was termed “animal consciousness,” by which Marx means a relationship of man to nature that has not yet been modified historically. It is clear that Boehmer’s attacks on Cage are rooted in Marxist critiques of culture as articulated particularly by the Frankfurt School. As is symptomatic of most Marxist critiques, Boehmer’s tends to reduce Cage’s work to a materialist understanding of culture, thus ignoring other philosophical aspects of Cage’s aesthetics such as phenomenology. However, his arguments have merit. Cage insists that isolation is a condition for chance. However “isolation” itself is a deliberately created environment or perception. The logic that un-freedom is a pre-condition for freedom holds inherent contradictions. On the west coast, there is a similar type of logic. Historical and political isolation was created through the disavowal of First Nations and Asian-

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41 See Chapter One for Duncan and Olson’s use of myth and history in their poetry.
42 In an interview with Hans Helms, Cage discussed his belief in socialist ideals of equality in relation to Maoist China where he locates the beginning of freedom of consciousness and where communication and music is open and liberated from hierarchical systems. Commenting on Mao’s revolution, Cage said: “The experience of the family has been extended through Mao’s influence so that in a sense that nation is itself a family. And I find this very beautiful” (79). Cage places nature and freedom within discourses of nationhood, similar to the rhetoric around the “pacific nation.” For Cage’s positions on China, the *I Ching* and socialist values, see Helms, “Reflections of a Progressive Composer on a Damaged Society,” *October* (82, Fall 1997), 77-93 (first published in 1974).
43 Boehmer, 74.
Canadians, resulting in a space of “freedom.” Boehmer’s critique is useful in this sense because it raises issues that were crucial to the construction of the west coast – “freedom” and “nature.” These two terms are not neutral. They are discursive categories which are historically and culturally contingent. Given the cultural and social aspirations of the “pacific nation,” it is not surprising that Whitehead and Cage were so readily accepted, especially Cage, whose aesthetics articulated and provided cultural legitimacy to the ideas of freedom and nature as they were being constructed on the west coast.

Ian Pepper has also pointed out the contradiction in the work of Cage. However, rather than trying to subvert the legitimacy of his practice, Pepper wants to highlight the ambivalence and complexity of Cage’s work, as well as many other practices that were involved in the avant-garde project of closing the gap between art and life. He summarized four contradictions in 4’33”:

1) the structure is a predetermined whole divided into parts; the structure is at once rational and pre-conceived as well as mystical and anarchistic; 2) the composition is a graphic material thing completely separate and unrelated to the sound of its performance; 3) “performance” is the pedagogical demonstration of the philosophy where music is “liquidated” and all sounds become equal (liberated); and, 4) “music” is the immediate contingency and conjunction of chance sounds. Cage’s practice creates a binary where “music” is writing on one hand and sound on the other. This duality, barrier, or binary is in operation in many modes of avant-garde production – in performance, happenings, and conceptual art where there is a text, “script,” or “score” and a corresponding (or not) performance.

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44 Pepper, 34.
45 In performance art of the 1960s, there is a third element added to Cagean practice: object production. Artists such as Joseph Kosuth, Robert Morris, and George Brecht have three unrelated elements in
The Festival of the Contemporary Arts in 1962 was a site for experimentation in open form from Olson’s poetics to Cage’s aesthetics of silence. Black Mountain and beat poetics were represented by Robert Creeley and Lawrence Ferlinghetti. They did not represent two diverse and separate movements – they had the same project of releasing sound from the order of language. Additionally, the social and political ethos of San Francisco poetry resonated on the campus. The Renaissance poets were engaged in a critique of American post-war consumerism. UBC students, while not necessarily emulating the rage and radicalism of the beats for example, were nonetheless active in the ideological debates of the cold war period, namely the polarization of capitalism and communism. On campus, students formed their own political parties, including Communist, Liberal, New Democratic, and Progressive Conservative. They ran spirited student elections that included campaigning and debates. Local, provincial, and federal lobbyists and politicians frequently visited the UBC campus and the debate over communism in particular was prevalent. As such, the dissenting politics of visiting artists in the Festival were of interest to many students. For example, Ferlinghetti’s reading was reviewed twice in *The Ubyssey*.

their work: language, performance and object production (video, photograph, or object). For a discussion of Cagean aesthetics in the art of Brecht, see Liz Kotz, "Post-Cagean Aesthetics and the 'event'-score," *October* (95, Winter 2001), 58-89.

46 Ferlinghetti, founder of City Lights Books and Publishing and author of *Coney Island of the Mind*, read from his new book of poetry *Starting from San Francisco*. He was a major force behind beat poetry and art in San Francisco through both his bookstore and his publishing house. Robert Creeley, hosted by Tallman, read his own work and Don Hunter, Head of Audio-Visual Department, University of Oregon Library, presented *Color Spectacular in Stereophonic Sound*, an event that consisted of two slide projectors with rheostat dimmers and stereophonic tape recordings. Hunter blended and overlaid his slides in coordination with music and sound effects. B.C. Binning Fonds.

47 While Olsonian poetics via Duncan was at the heart of open form poetry, Cage was also a serious figure to the poets and one who was recognized as being significant to their own aesthetic and philosophical concerns. As Creeley wrote to Tallman after seeing Cage in 1962 in Vancouver: “Have been in a trance of sorts from hearing & seeing Cage and Merce Cunningham. What a wild day that was. Wow...” 27 March 1962, Tallman Fonds.

48 For the campus political landscape, see student election coverage in *The Ubyssey*, 6 Feb 1962.

49 The polarization of capitalism and communism was contested and there was acknowledgment of the philosophical problem of this dichotomy. See Jack Ornstein, “If peace equals communism, what does war equal?” in *The Ubyssey* (8 Feb 1962), 2.
his recent book *Starting From San Francisco* that included an LP disc of sound to accompany the poetry, Ferlinghetti re-asserted poetry as a vocal art and incorporated contemporary audio technology into his poetic critique. Bowering reviewed Ferlinghetti’s reading of his poem *The Great Chinese Dragon*:

> He writes quite inspired description of the San Francisco New Year’s scene, and from that locale right out to an undiverted satirical blast at the war-making fringe of all America and the whole world...he works with a propelling sound that drives...his long dragon through the Chinatown America streets.

Certainly in Vancouver and at the Festivals, visiting American artists were able to stage “blasts at the war-making world” – comments and critiques that were accepted, digested, and adapted by local students, writers, and artists.

Continuing Halprin’s project from the year before, Merce Cunningham, John Cage, David Tudor, and Vancouver dancer Helen Goodwin performed at the 1962 Festival. Cunningham performed *Antic Meet* (1958) in conjunction with a score by Cage. His dance, like Halprin, was not choreographed in tandem with the music. Instead, unmediated by music, Cunningham wanted to confront the environment, including “readymades,” in rhythmic and somewhat improvised movement. Cage’s scores were linked to Cunningham’s dance only in that they shared the same space at the same time.

The 1963 Festival of the Contemporary Arts continued Cagean aesthetics with the San Francisco Tape Music Center’s “electronic music and transformation,” a

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51 Cunningham’s performances were entitled *Aeon* (music by John Cage), *Crisis* (music by Conlon Nancarrow), *Antic Meet* (music by John Cage). B.C. Binning Fonds.
52 Cunningham and Cage met in Seattle in 1938 at a dance workshop (Cunningham was born in Centralia, Washington and his early training took place in Seattle) and started to work together in 1942 when Cunningham moved to New York to join the Martha Graham Dance Company. See *Dancers on a Plane: John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Jasper Johns* (Liverpool: The Tate Gallery Liverpool, 1990).
visual and sound happening. Their piece *Transformation* caused a sensation. Set in the UBC Auditorium, the program took place over a period of thirty minutes during which time the room was visually transformed. Objects, such as hammers, sticks, and miscellaneous junk, were hung from ceilings and walls. Sounds were brought from the outside through four large speakers in addition to internal canned sounds in the auditorium and the actual recorded sounds of the performance. These visual and sound changes resulted in a new environment in which two taped piano improvisations by Sender and Subotnick were played.

Balkind described the performance:

> When thousands of IBM computer cards flutter down from the ceiling to the tune of electronic music made of recorded everyday sounds, interspersed with the resonant clanking of metallic junk taken from Vancouver dumps; and when a brass band bursts suddenly into the auditorium, marches out, and as suddenly bursts in a few minutes later, and then three plastic balloons inflate to enormous size before bouncing around on the heads of the student body, then we have defined the word ‘festive.’

Everyday, ambient sounds, both live and electronically-produced, filled the space and the audience’s transformative role used Cage’s ideas of chance and indeterminacy. It used a script to choreograph the event but the sounds and actions of its performance were indeterminate, instantaneous, and improvised. In “Post-Cagean Aesthetics and the ‘event’-score,” Liz Kotz refers to Cage’s written compositions as “event scores,” arguing that his scores offer a sort of template for future performance and conceptual practices. She uses the term “event” in order to expand Cagean practice to include dance, multimedia, and performance. For Cage, sounds were events, albeit embedded

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53 Balkind wrote to Ann Halprin in October 1962 asking her to introduce him to the directors of the San Francisco Tape Music centre. He met Ramon Sender and Morton Subotnick later that month en route to San Diego for the annual meeting of the Western Association of Art Museums (WAAM) of which he was a member. The Tape Music Center was also featured at the 1966 Festival, see Chapter Three.

54 Description of *Transformation* by Sender and Subotnick, Balkind Series, 15 Dec 1962.

55 Untitled document, Balkind Series, 1963
in musical compositions. Kotz notes that in philosophical discourses, the word
“event” has been used by Foucault to signify historical shifts or ruptures, rather than
speaking in terms of essences. Duncan thinks of humans as “cosmic events,” and
Olson, in reference to Whitehead, conceives of acts of poetry as events within the
field of composition. In Cagean aesthetics, Kotz posits, the score is the conceptual
outline of the events that are to be implemented or occur during the duration of the
piece.

Cage’s duality of language and performance and his principles of
indeterminacy and chance were present at the Festivals from the outset with Halprin’s
dance presentation in 1961 (and in Cage, Tudor, and Cunningham in 1962, and the
San Francisco Tape Music Center in 1963). Seeking to generate movement through
various events such as props and speech, sounds, in particular, were a major part of
Halprin’s practice.\(^{56}\) Using “task structures,” she would stipulate the duration and
events of the dance, and within that, movements were generated in an improvised
manner. In San Francisco, Halprin’s dance studios were significant sites of practice
and learning for artists, musicians, and dancers: La Monte Young, Simone Forti,
Yvonne Rainer, Trisha Brown, and Robert Morris attended her workshops in the early
1960s.\(^{57}\) Rainer recalls that “Halprin had a tremendous flair for the dramatic. Her
emphasis was on using tasks to generate movement, which were then transformed
into dance.”\(^{58}\)

Halprin used scores for her choreography that also included Cagean scores for
sounds. In this way, there is a second dichotomy in dance in addition to the
language/performance: sound/body. In other words, while sounds are part of the

\(^{56}\) Kotz, 74.
\(^{57}\) Ibid., 74.
\(^{58}\) Rainer as quoted in Kotz, 74. Simone Forti similarly emulated Halprin in designing “dance scores.”
composition, the movement of the body is not dictated by them. Unlike traditional
dance, where movement and music modify each other or work in conjunction to
narrate a story or idea, in Cagean aesthetics, sounds are random and bodily movement
does not aim to describe or act them out. While a Halprin dance may be tightly
linguistically structured, it is totally improvised bodily and “multifocal and mobile.”59
In Halprin’s workshops, the idea was to “get inside of a sound” so that instead of
acting out a sound externally, the sound was experienced internally. La Monte Young
recalls:

> When the sounds are very long, as many of those we made at
> Ann Halprin’s were, it can be easier to get inside them...I began
to see how each sound was its own world and that this world was
similar to our world in that we experienced it through our own bodies,
that is, in our own terms.60

Sound experienced through bodies is similar to the city living inside the
proprioceptive poet – where the city speaks out through the poet. For Olson, sound is
kinetic, moving through the dancer’s body as an energy transfer. In Halprin’s
practice, Cagean aesthetics and proprioception meet. In fact, Olson claimed that
dance was at the base of his discipline because it demonstrates the projective form to
a greater potential than any other media, using mind, body, and soul as vectors of
energy in the field. Trained as a professional dancer, Olson performed with
Cunningham in one of the first happenings and he was impressed by its non-
descriptive kinetic features.61

59 Lawrence Halprin, “A Discussion of the Five-Legged Stool,” *San Francisco Sunday Chronicle*, 29
April 1962.
60 Ibid., 75.
61 The performance inspired Olson’s own research into cultures of the Upper Nile and led to his
creation of a fictive “tribe” called the Gumnoi or Nakeds who had “taken direct energy from nature.”
Elder, 405.
Stan Brakhage

American avant-garde filmmaker Stan Brakhage explored pure seeing and like Cage, who sought the liberation of sounds from human-made systems, Brakhage wanted the eye to be untutored, unprejudiced and un-ruled by social laws. In 1963, he attended the Festival of the Contemporary Arts where his seminal film *Dog Star Man* (Part I) made its world premiere. His presence at the Festival played a significant part in the formation of the west coast artistic milieu as his films embodied the poetics of Olson and Cage and brought them into the realm of the visual. Brakhage’s visit was not only a defining event for Vancouver filmmaking but it was also a key moment of cross-fertilization that brought the aesthetics of open form poetry into the realm of the visual.

*Dog Star Man* is considered to be a paradigmatic example of synaesthetic and mythopoeic cinema. Seventy-eight minutes in length, the film is silent and consists of *Prelude* and Parts One through Four. *Prelude* is a fast collage of superimposed images, blurry and indistinct.Eventually through the speedy haze, certain images become discernable: earth, air, fire, water, and childbirth. One shot shows a man climbing up a mountain with his dog (*Dog Star Man*), and autonomous images are superimposed upon each other: the moon, sun, sex, blood vessels, a pumping heart, forest, clouds. They flash in a non-narrative, non-ordered fashion, what Eisenstein called “intellectual montage.” Part One slows down with fewer superimposed images; shots are long, colourful, and fade in and out. A shot shows the visceral pumping human heart and vessels, the next shot is solar flares in the universe – a

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juxtaposition that demonstrates their shared universal energy. As film critics Gene Youngblood and Adam Sitney argue, Brakhage’s film is a cinematic representation of consciousness as it manifests in the mind of the artist. Brakhage is “attempting to express the totality of consciousness, the reality continuum of the living present.”

Synaesthesia is the “simultaneous response of two or more of the senses to the stimulation of one, so that one hears (as well as sees) sights, tastes (as well as smells) odours, etc.” Youngblood defines synaesthetic cinema as film that models itself after patterns of nature rather than attempting to conform nature to film’s structure. He uses McLuhan’s terms to explain:

Synaesthetic cinema is the only aesthetic language suited to the post-industrial, post-literate, man-made environment with its multi-dimensional simulsensory network of information sources.

If the visual mode lends a sense of continuity to experience and perceptions, synaesthetic cinema destabilizes it to suspend visual space and create “acoustic space.” Synaesthesia includes opposing concepts of syncretism and metamorphosis, where syncretism is the combination of many different forms, and metamorphosis is the creation of a whole new reality. Synaesthesia was also the mode used in Transformation by the San Francisco Tape Music Center in 1963. The performance consisted of many parts (sounds, junk, music, objects) and through its duration, the space was transformed into a new reality.

Mythopoeic cinema uses synaesthetic approaches to create cinema that expresses metaphysical reality as opposed to physical reality. It is neither reality nor fiction and does not fit into the typical genres of film: cinema-verité, surreal,

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64 Ibid., 88.
65 Elder, 470.
66 Youngblood, 77.
constructivist or expressionist. Rather, it is about myths and myth-making where the superimposition of images is individual expression on a mythic scale. In *Dog Star Man*, solar flares and domestic scenes reveal that consciousness is located neither solely in the mind nor in the universe. In this way, it differs from Cagean aesthetics because there is no script and thus no language/performance dichotomy. Here, the two systems cannot form a dichotomy because both are subsumed into the whole mythopoetic form. For Brakhage, consciousness operates between and beyond systems of language and performance.

Robert Creeley, also a participant in the 1963 Festival, was a major impetus behind bringing Brakhage from San Francisco to Vancouver. In a letter to Tallman, Creeley urged him to invite Brakhage, writing that as a protégé of Duncan:

> He [Brakhage] would be completely equal to dealing in “literary” areas, you should hear him on Stein...his film is akin to the “field” of the poem, and what materials or means are considered to operate there. He is terrific, for example, on the issue of “image” and “continuity” and that is just where so much “drama” goes for me so very damn slack.

Not only does this letter illustrate the degree to which personal connections shaped the west coast, it also reveals the centrality, if not dominance, of Olson’s theories to the small California avant-garde.

On invitation from Duncan, Brakhage arrived in San Francisco in 1952 from Kansas and joined the bohemian circle. Duncan and Jess opened the King Ubu

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67 Ibid., 106-8 for a discussion of cinematic modes and genres.
68 Candida Smith argues that mythopoetics was the most significant artistic mode in California, placing poetry in opposition to history with personal experience and meaning-making as the most powerful cultural gesture of freedom. Charles Olson, in *A Special View of History*, had the belief that mythology had a more constitutive role in subjectivity than history.
69 In a letter to Tallman regarding the 1963 Festival, Creeley discusses ideas around the *Maximus Poems* and supports “Olson’s characterization of the poem as a high energy construct, and as a transfer of energy, etc. so that the art becomes a relation to that energy, and a control thereof, as a transfer.” This was likely the content of his Festival lecture. 27 March 1962, Warren Tallman Fonds.
70 Letter, Creeley to Tallman, 29 April 1962, Brakhage stayed at the Creeley’s during the Festival.
Gallery in 1952, bringing together literature, poetry, theatre and visual art. Duncan directed theatrical performances, the first of which was *The Five Georges* by exiled San Francisco poet Gertrude Stein. King Ubu closed after only one year. In 1954, it became the site of the legendary Six Gallery, the locus of significant events of the San Francisco Renaissance, including the reading of *Howl*. Both galleries cultivated Duncan’s poetic and literary interests, from European dada to early American modernism. Brakhage’s profound interest in Duncan’s poetic practices led him to Olson’s theories on open form and kinetic art and provoked Brakhage to explore notions of embodiment through his cinema.

In his book, *The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition of Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, and Charles Olson*, R. Bruce Elder weaves an intellectually rich and philosophically broad context within which to approach the films of Brakhage. Connecting New England Transcendentalism with Williams and Stein, and the open form poetics of Olson with philosophical questions of embodiment as dealt with by Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Whitehead, Elder’s encyclopedic study fuses microanalyses with macrocosmic ideas of metaphysics. For the purposes of this study, I want to narrow the consideration of Brakhage to his role in the formation of west coast aesthetics. In particular, his translation of Olson and to a certain extent,

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71 Jess brought his colleagues from the California School of Fine Art and exhibited Bay Area expressionism, junk, and assemblage. It was named Ubu after the play *Ubu Roi* by Parisian poet Alfred Jarry, friend of Duchamp and satirist who was involved with dada, surrealism and the anarchist movement in Paris. For a history of Ubu and other bohemian spaces in San Francisco, see Seymour Howard, *The Beat Generation Galleries and Beyond*, Davis: John Natsoulas Press, 1996.

72 As Creeley remarked, Brakhage was seriously interested in Stein’s poetry. Stein forms a major axis of analysis in Elder’s book. Like Stein who used repetitions that build on one another and fragment, Brakhage’s film involves “paratactical, non-hierarchical modes of construction.” In *Dog Star Man*, “memories, perceptions, imaginings” are indistinguishable and have equal function, relating to the idea that consciousness is continually building and repeating itself, a process in which each repetition is similar but not identical. Elder, 294-5.

73 Like Brakhage, Elder is also calling for the primordial and pre-verbal in art and for the expression of human consciousness outside of discursive systems. Elder demonstrates a critical command of twentieth-century discourses on art, literature, and philosophy and in his total celebration of Brakhage, he posits some persuasive arguments about often marginalized spiritual, bodily and un-intellectual dimensions of art.
Cage, into visual modes provides a significant model of the cross-fertilization of poetics and art.

For Olson, Whitehead, and Cage, "nature" is a crucial idea. Elder characterizes Brakhage's films as Romantic, especially *Dog Star Man*, and he likens them to the poetic romanticism of William Wordsworth and Ezra Pound where the individual must confront both nature and his consciousness. San Francisco beat poet Michael McClure reviewed the film for *Artforum* in 1963, commenting that "Brakhage shows the cosmic and divine drama of flesh and thought and memory and hallucination and aspiration reaching towards the earthly."74 The film's protagonist is on a mythic climb up the mountain with his dog, but unlike the man who stumbles and falls, the dog frolics as if laughing at the cosmic trick of humans believing in their ability to conquer mountain peaks.75 The human imagination is an important idea to both the Romantics and to Brakhage. Elder notes: "*Dog Star Man* rests on the Romantic myth of cosmogenesis, according to which the human imagination is identical with a creative force immanent in nature."76 Cosmogenesis re-iterates Duncan's repeated articulation that a human being is a cosmic event. Mythopoesis is the mode through which this can be expressed because it accounts for, and depends on, personal myth-making and cosmic energy. In *Dog Star Man*, Brakhage brings together the action of the protagonist, the myth of the cosmos, and personal images from his own life.77 Brakhage wanted to reveal vision's link to consciousness. For Brakhage, "vision is an activity of the world that takes place in us and through us."78

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75 A review of *Dog Star Man* in *The Ulysses* was not as positive as McClure's, stating that Brakhage's work is "too personal and too obsessed." *The Ulysses* (21 Feb 1963), 4.
76 Elder, 145.
77 Ibid., 144-5.
78 Ibid., 324. Elder posts that Brakhage, the Romantics and Maurice Merleau-Ponty shared the same belief in the primordial awareness of the lived body in nature, awareness through vision.
Brakhage's film equates interior human space with cosmic energy, a philosophical idea known as embodiment.

Embodiment is one of the most central philosophical notions to open form poetics, spontaneity, and cosmogenesis. The body is no longer considered to be separate from the mind. Instead, perception, ideas, and feelings reside inside the individual as non-rational forms. According to Maurice Merleau-Ponty (see Chapter One), a perception is an exterior apprehension. Following Whitehead, a perception is understood as a non-rational image of consciousness. A proprioceptive poet was aware that ideas, language and perceptions were formed through sensual experiences and so poetry had to be written as a projection of experience. In film, music and dance, the inner world is understood as part of nature. In Cartesian duality, as Belgrad points out, the mind-body split supported "mastery over nature." With this duality erased and with subjectivity understood as dynamic and holistic, the world is internal. In spontaneity and open form, "nature" is the field of composition and no longer the object of consumption.

The "bifurcation of nature" is one of the philosophical constructs against which Whitehead was writing. A product of Cartesianism, the bifurcation of nature is the division of nature into the world of sensations, colours, sounds and feelings (body) and the world where nature is a scientific abstraction of particles and atoms (mind). Whitehead proposed embodiment to counter the bifurcation. That is, he suggests that there are not two spheres of the world and that what we see, hear, feel and touch in the everyday is the world. In *Dog Star Man*, the microcosmic sensations (human heart pumping) become macrocosmic perceptions (solar flares, the moon, and

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79 See Chapter One for an outline of the main principles of Whitehead's process philosophy.
80 Elder calls this "the modern bifurcation of the ontological universe into logic and abstractions." 387.
Brakhage's experimental and low-tech aesthetic energized local filmmakers to take production into their own hands. As cultural historian Colin Browne suggests, early Vancouver filmmakers, including Sam Perry, Gerry Gilbert, and Gary Lee-Nova explored the "spiritual, sexual, social, political and psychedelic possibilities of cinema." \(^81\) The Festival of the Contemporary Arts was in large part responsible for provoking early cinematic production in Vancouver through providing a network of west coast filmmakers, including Brakhage, as well as San Francisco filmmakers Ron Rice and Bruce Conner. Brakhage's films provided a model of personal discovery with an emphasis on the frame of an image rather than on shots. Conner, to be discussed in a following section, practiced in the beat aesthetic of collage in which "stock footage" was organized in a non-narrative structure and often suggested political and social critique. \(^82\)

In Vancouver, Lee-Nova made films in a similar method to Conner, using "cut-up" archival footage collaged with his own shots in fragmented arrangements. \(^83\) *Steel Mushrooms* from 1967 presented "a violent reaction to the sign systems of technology, industry, nuclear war, and television." \(^84\) Incorporating a multiple-track sound score of rock music and ambient noise, the film's violent imagery is intensified


\(^84\) Ibid., 165. For Lee-Nova's influences and practice, see also Alvin Balkind, "Gary Lee-Nova: Frustrums, Fragments and Spaces," in *artsCanada* (vol. 26, no. 2, April 1969), 11-2.
by disjunctive sound and music. While Lee-Nova’s filmic structure in *Steel Mushrooms* resembles the symmetry of his hard-edge paintings, his use of randomness and sound suggests an interest in Cagean aesthetics of chance.\(^{85}\)

Absent from most accounts of Vancouver film history is UBC student and filmmaker Larry Kent. In narrative feature-length films such as *The Bitter Ash* (1963) and *Sweet Substitute* (1964), both shot in Vancouver, Kent’s main themes were betrayal, sexuality, alienation and conformity in North American society.\(^{86}\) They were both screened multiple times on campus and Kent was notorious for his sexually explicit and taboo subjects. *The Ubyssey* frequently reviewed his films.\(^{87}\) One report included a cartoon in which Kent stands before “Kent Productions” with a suggestively-dressed woman – perhaps a prostitute or just a voluptuous student – and promises “yes, with all that talent I am sure I can find a role for you.”\(^{88}\)

In subject matter and style, his early works were consistent with beat-inspired narratives such as Robert Frank’s *Pull My Daisy* (1959) and Ron Rice’s *The Flower Thief* (1960), the latter of which was screened concurrently with Brakhage’s *Dog Star Man* at the 1963 Festival.\(^{89}\) For example, *The Bitter Ash*, in an attack on mainstream popular culture, follows the lives of young beatniks and students and explores sexuality, rebellion and conformity. The protagonist Colin, a playwright and young father, struggles to publish his work and in poverty, turns to prostitution – a dark plot that is accentuated by a free jazz score.\(^{90}\) *Sweet Substitute* also explores the theme that was central to beat poetics – male sexuality. Using a jazz score, the film shows a

\(^{85}\) See Chapter Three for Lee-Nova in relation to John Cage.

\(^{86}\) Browne, 111. For a history of Kent’s film production, see Dave Douglas, “Exile on Hastings and Main Street: The Vancouver Films of Larry Kent,” in *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* (vol. 5, no. 2, fall 1996), 85-99.


\(^{88}\) *The Ubyssey*, 13 Feb 1964.

\(^{89}\) *The Ubyssey*, 14 Feb 1963.

\(^{90}\) *The Bitter Ash* also includes a graphic sex scene for which the film was temporarily banned. Douglas, 91.
student's obsession with sexual conquest and experience. Kent allowed actors to improvise during their rehearsals and then used the taped improvisations as dialogue in the film. The result was a raw, free-flow narrative in the style of cinema vérité.

Marshall McLuhan and Gerd Stern

The 1964 Festival of the Contemporary Arts was built around the ideas of Marshall McLuhan. McLuhan himself presented three lectures and participated in a panel discussion that accompanied the exhibition of American pop art Art Becomes Reality at the UBC Fine Arts Gallery. San Francisco artist Gerd Stern presented a visual poem that was directly engaged with McLuhan's theories of multimedia sensory experience and synaesthesia. Through extensive correspondence with both McLuhan and Stern, Alvin Balkind put together a Festival that he hoped would address the massive shifts of the electric age, such as nuclear energy, space exploration, computers and automation, developments he termed “cataclysmic.” Furthermore, Balkind wanted to put McLuhan’s ideas in dialogue with and against various contemporary artistic discourses, namely new American poetry and pop art. Balkind came into contact with San Francisco poet/sculptor Gerd Stern through the San Francisco Tape Music Center and he immediately identified a local west coast strain of McLuhanism. After meeting Stern in San Francisco, Balkind wrote to McLuhan:

He [Stern] has for so long felt like a voice in the wilderness, where no one knew of Marshall McLuhan. The Gutenberg Galaxy lit up his world,
and evidently gave his life a strong direction. From then on, his work was a direct attempt to put into visual and aural form what he has gleaned from your writings. When I told him that you might be at our Festival, he became very excited...I said that he must write you, that you would be exceedingly happy to know him.93

In *Gutenberg Galaxy*, McLuhan dissects the effects of Johann Gutenberg’s invention of type over five hundred years ago. The advent of linear type ruptured oral culture and ushered in print culture, a shift that, McLuhan argues, profoundly altered human perception and communication. With print culture, the eye became the privileged sense - where words, language and sound became a physical, tangible system. According to McLuhan, the print culture was now, half a millennium later, undergoing a transformation catalyzed by the electronic age. The telegraph, global telecommunications and television were un-doing the potency of the typed word, thus opening up the field of human interaction and orienting it back towards oral (auditory) tradition. McLuhan identified this transformation as the shift from an “eye space to an ear space,” where the printed page was no longer the central mode of communication. Instead, multiple senses were now crucially engaged in relaying, receiving and sharing information. In Vancouver and at UBC, students and artists were engaged with the cultural implications of the epistemological shifts that McLuhan was identifying, including Lee-Nova and Iain Baxter (discussed at length in the next chapter). Jeff Wall also addressed the role of media technology. In a cartoon from January 1965, he draws a “former scholar” who sits atop an impressive book stack of academic and classic literature and watches television.94 Suggesting the perceived redundancy of literature in the electric age, Wall’s cartoon provokes a dialogue on the intellectual potential of the media age.

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93 Balkind to McLuhan, 18 Oct 1963, Balkind Series.
94 *The Ubyssy*, 15 Jan 1965.
McLuhan, in a complex consideration of the relationship between subjectivity, space and sensory perception, used the term *acoustic space* to indicate the space of shared multi-faceted communication. Acoustic space is auditory or sound space. It is exactly the space that Olson, Cage, synaesthetic cinema, and *Tish* were concerned with. It is space in which sound-energy reverberates and transfers:

Auditory space has no point of favoured focus. It’s a sphere without fixed boundaries...[it is] dynamic, always in flux, creating its own dimensions moment by moment.95

McLuhan’s interest was motivated by the same philosophical premises of Olson, Brakhage and Cage; that is, the collapse of inside and outside, or the end of Cartesian dualism. He shared with Brakhage a belief in the primordial nature of art as a pre-verbal state. Olson’s poetics in both verse and dance also engaged with an idea of the primordial in art, where the energy being transferred in the field of composition is like a universal source or essence. Elder refers to primordial awareness as “preverbal,” writing that:

it is the awareness of the child - it is formed as a cross between the awareness that we come closest to tapping in our dreams and proprioceptive experience. It constantly undergoes change, and more than that, it is synaesthetic.96

Stern made three contributions to the 1964 Festival which addressed poetry, sculpture, painting and sound: twelve collage poems, the visual poem *Mosaic*, and excerpts from his audio-visual presentation *The Verbal American Landscape*. *Mosaic* consisted of a poetry reading accompanied by slides and ending with colour footage of his large poem-sculpture *Contact Is The Only Love* on display at the San Francisco

96 Elder, 14. McLuhan linked the electric age with the primordial. In language, the senses are differentiated, but in simultaneity, such as in mass communication, the senses merge: “We now live in a global village...a simultaneous happening. We are back in acoustic space. We have begun again to structure the primordial feeling; the tribal emotions from which a few centuries of literacy divorced us.” *Medium is the Message*, 63.
Museum of Art. The poem, also entitled *Mosaic*, is a stream of free verse, creating a montage of images to create an experience of overlapping colours, words, and sounds. Alluding to McLuhan’s book publication format, Stern used the mosaic as a symbol of an all-over, multi-dimensional form of unity that “can manage a diversity of experiences gathered in a single life, or a traditional awareness developed in a communal life.” In this sense, the mosaic form is similar to the function of myth in projective poetry. Olson, Duncan and *Tish* poets used myth instead of history as a way of expressing human awareness or consciousness. Brakhage, in mythopoeic cinema, also uses a mosaic form where the whole is made up of diverse parts. Seen within the context of the west coast, Stern’s appropriation of McLuhan was in keeping with the local philosophical and aesthetic practices. *Mosaic* referenced McLuhan, pop artists, and beat poets:

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using up on anything as
common objects out of popular culture
sculptors and painters fortune tellers
like Coplans in Art Forum 6
on a painting of Lichtenstein’s
of a hand holding hair-spray
“the vulgarity of the image itself is shocking
in the way howl of the Beat poets is…”
somebodies writing on or off pop art
As a new name brand of social satire and protest…
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The poem continues with words and images from art and culture (“Shazaam,” “Snap Crackle Pop”) and literary and scholarly references (McLuhan, Philip Lamantia, Walt Whitman, Michael McClure). What is most critical is Stern’s linkage of McLuhan’s notions of embodiment with pop art:

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97 Letter from Stern to Balkind describing his three contributions to the Festival, 12 Dec 1963. Balkind Series.
99 *Mosaic*, unpublished, Balkind Series.
Lichtenstein explodes
blows up a cartoon
bigger than LIFE
(no five cent magazine)
a question of scale
Try projection
the medium is the message
can you get into the strip
on the canvas off the easel
or is the jump into that world
only into the panel
on the newsprint page... 100

The poem finished with a projected view of his poetry-sculpture Contact Is the Only Love. The octagonal sculpture had inset signs that flashed the traffic commands “Go,” “Yield,” and “Enter with Caution,” at a rate of 480 flashes per minute.101 In this work, Stern investigated both the effects of signs and commands, as well as movement, light and sound on human perception and behaviour. In The Verbal American Landscape, Stern focused on eyes, words and ears and incorporated elements from everyday life in the happening, such as billboards, newspapers and television.102 UBC students, familiar with McLuhan’s theories, beat and open form poetry, and performance art, responded with enthusiasm:

The San Francisco poet-artist has captured with sound and sense and sight all the kaleidoscope of signs and sex symbols that all The Others tried to portray in mere words in their books.103

Acoustic space that was created by electric media meant that museums and art galleries were no longer the only viable environments for art production. Cage and Kaprow, for example, were doing performance and installation art (including

100 Ibid., n. pag.
102 Gerd Stern, “Proposal for the Verbal American Landscape,” document, Balkind series, n. date. Stern gives the “score” for the performance: “[it] is designed for presentation in medium-sized auditoriums, theatres, galleries. Visual elements will be constructed of second-hand signs, marquees and billboards combined with projected images and with specially built effects and controls. Audio will consist of multiple pre-recorded tapes amplified through a series of speakers.”
103 The Ubyssey (7 Feb 1964), 5.
happenings) in everyday, multi-sensory space. McLuhan’s theories of non-perspectival acoustic space allowed for an understanding of happenings and assemblage, where the viewing body, the dimensionality of the work and the sensory perceptions of experiencing the work, are all activated. Richard Cavell has briefly noted Stern’s engagement with McLuhan focusing on the kinetic and electric aspects of his work in the context of happenings. However, Cavell’s analysis of McLuhan considers mainly performance, installation and kinetic art. In Vancouver art history, McLuhan has been most frequently applied to the performance-based collective Intermedia (1967-72) and the conceptual-based group The N.E. Thing Co., established by artist in Iain Baxter in the mid-1960s. Rightfully so, as both groups explore and develop precepts in McLuhan’s work, such as synaesthetic experience and discourses around space, language and the body. However, in 1964, the collaboration of Stern and McLuhan in conjunction with the pop exhibition *Art Becomes Reality* is a significant moment of intersection between McLuhan, New American poetry (beat poet Michael McClure read at the Festival), and pop art.

Balkind’s *Art Becomes Reality* directly addressed the relationship between art and life and the avant-garde insistence that the two were not separate. Selected and borrowed from the Bagley Wright collection of Seattle, works by Roy Lichtenstein, Robert Indiana, Ed Ruscha, Jasper Johns, Bruce Conner, Robert Morris, Robert Rauschenberg, and Andy Warhol were included. Hesitating to name it “pop art,” Balkind acknowledged various labels such as neo-dada, art of the common object, and new realism, and saw a commonality in their investigation of “things.” Included

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104 Cavell, *McLuhan in Space*, 176. Cavell briefly discusses the Festival of the Contemporary Arts at UBC though he does not acknowledge Stern’s presence there in 1964 or refer to poetry or visual works by Stern, 181-2.

105 Ibid., 182-6.

106 The exhibition, on loan from the Bagley Wright private collection in Seattle, was reviewed by Barry Lord in “Pop Art in Canada,” *Artforum*, vol. II, no. 9, March 1963.
was Warhol’s *Do It Yourself* (1962), a partially painted pastoral image of a seaside cottage, wooden boats out of water and seagulls overhead. The stenciled numbers indicate the areas to paint thus handing over the so-called creative act to the viewer. The painting becomes both an aesthetic object and a thing or object for everyday use. Referring to the merging of art and life, Balkind wrote that “those who contend that the ‘vulgar,’ the common, the material aspects of our culture cannot rightly constitute the subject matter or the inspiration of art are being proven wrong by this generation of artists.”

*Art Becomes Reality* made an impact on local audiences and the University Fine Arts Gallery experienced an unprecedented number of visitors. Robert Morris’ *Box with the Sound of its own Making* caused particular excitement. Displayed as an ordinary wooden box but with recorded noises of its construction emanating from it, Morris’ sculpture confounded boundaries between media and between art and life. A sculpture, a music box, and a geometric structure, the work was about the concreteness of an object. The viewers, having already been exposed to John Cage, Merce Cunningham, The San Francisco Tape Music Centre and Stan Brakhage in the recent past, were not unfamiliar with contemporary art practices that used sound.

Vancouver audiences had their first encounter with pop art and the responses were vivid. In a letter to the Bagley Wrights, Balkind wrote:

> The mingled cries of love and pain, the explosive laughter and the audible silence of contemplative observation all joined and merged with the sounds and sights of the show. My own feelings have been complex (for me); but the overall emotion I feel is a salad composed of gratification, personal satisfaction, and great joy through freedom.

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As evidenced by the intersection of McLuhan, beat poetry and Gerd Stern at the 1964 Festival, “pop art” was not a rigid category in Vancouver or on the west coast. Accepted as a pop artist, Stern’s poetry and performance incorporated elements of beat kineticism and fragmentation. Similarly, Robert Morris, represented in *Art Becomes Reality* with *Box with the Sound of Its own Making*, incorporated Cagean juxtapositions of sound. Art historical discourses have assigned Cage and McLuhan to Fluxus and Intermedia. As I have aimed to demonstrate, these divisions are too absolute. Cage was an important figure for early dance, happenings and film, as was McLuhan for pre-Intermedia considerations of beat poetry and pop art. McLuhan identified the increasing institutionalization and bureaucratization that was occurring within globalization and recognized academic institutions as becoming the “social control towers for the entire society.” His lecture at the 1964 Festival “The Strange Tendency of Popular Art to Go Iconic and Highbrow,” addressed the relationship between “popular art” and the university and argued that pop art was being appropriated by the university to become “high brow.” The university is part of what he called the global nervous system: “the instantaneous network [that] alters all spatial factors and all inter-personal relations, and the entire procedure in education. It changes the entire character of work, also. Work and learning become one.” This lecture complemented *Art Becomes Reality* and threw into question the contexts of art, specifically pop art, from the university setting to the everyday.

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110 Morris has been categorized as a conceptually-oriented artist rather than a pop artist, who, similar to Robert Smithson, was concerned with institutional critique. In “Robert Morris and John Cage: Reconstructing a Dialogue,” Branden W. Joseph argues for a re-consideration of Morris' position in avant-garde discourses. Specifically, he wants to look at Morris' production vis-à-vis Cagean aesthetics. Morris exhibited in San Francisco at the Dilexi gallery in the 1960s and began to explore Cagean aesthetics at Halprin's dance workshops. Branden chronicles some of Morris' artistic activities and posits them as explorations in Cage, such as film experiments and audience collaboration. Branden W. Joseph, “Robert Morris and John Cage: Reconstructing a Dialogue,” *October* (81, Summer 1997), 59-69.


112 Ibid., 5 Jan 1964.
McLuhan’s theories continued to resonate in Vancouver at the 1965 Festival with the multi-media happening, or “environment” entitled the *Medium is the Message*.\(^\text{113}\) One of the first Vancouver-produced visual presentations at the Festival, the performance synthesised or mechanized perception by using sound and light. In one hour, with “event tasks” such as painting, sculpture, architecture, projection, photography, words, electronic tapes and movement, the barn-like Armouries was transformed into a projection space. Screens hung on the walls and featured constantly changing colours, patterns and images and dancers’ silhouettes swayed behind hanging cloths. Audience members altered the space through their own touch, voice and movement as they created objects and sounds.\(^\text{114}\) The Amouries itself was a model of McLuhan’s acoustic space: an ear-space where viewers were no longer passive recipients of visual spectacle but rather active participants in a process of kinetic energy. The *Medium is the Message* was a Vancouver project, conceptualized by Helen Goodwin, Iain Baxter, David Orcutt, Courtland Hultberg, Abraham Rogatnick, Takao Tanabe, Alvin Balkind, Sam Perry, and Roy Kiyooka.\(^\text{115}\)

Incorporating the diverse aesthetics that had been explored in Vancouver - Cage’s aesthetics of chance, Halprin’s bodily improvisations, and Stern’s visual and moving poetry - the performance was a crystallization of west coast aesthetics.

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\(^\text{113}\) Cavell identifies this 1965 event as the most exemplary of McLuhan’s ideas at the Festivals, 181. My account positions the 1964 Festival as the most pivotal for the significance of McLuhan on the west coast.

\(^\text{114}\) Letter from Abraham Rogatnick to Julia Gatter of New York City. Gatter inquired about McLuhan’s visit to Vancouver after reading about it in an article in *Life*. Rogatnick described some reactions: “some compared their feelings to that which might occur during a brilliantly conducted mass in a cathedral. A godly [sic] number felt cheated: the lack of familiar organization, the emphasis on chance and the absence of a sequential ‘story line’ disturbed them or at any rate, bored them.” 16 March 1966. BC Binning Fonds.

Bruce Conner

The 1965 Festival included *The Medium is the Message*, a reading by San Francisco poet Jack Spicer, and a disturbing and intense exhibition by filmmaker and assemblage beat artist Bruce Conner.\(^{116}\) A cartoon by Jeff Wall from Feb 5, 1965 shows audience reactions to the diversity of the avant-garde practices on display. The accompanying article discusses the "mental blocks" of some of the students participating. Wall mirrors this "fear" in his drawing, where some spectators declare, "Gee, I hope nobody recognizes me!" while another disgruntled viewer attempts to burn the artist's rear end with a lit cigarette – the artist being an "avant-garde" tattooist at work on a naked woman.

However, the student body was serious about the contemporary international political climate and their activism increased on campus. For example, one former UBC arts student called on the university community to support the Berkeley Free Speech Movement, writing:

this is a serious struggle – an attempt to alleviate restrictions imposed upon student participation in political activity on campus... As Canadians benefiting from the freedom of political association and activity, support of UBC would be appreciated.\(^ {117}\)

Conner's critique of American post-war society found a friendly venue at the Festival where many students were engaged with political activism and had strong anti-Vietnam sentiments.\(^ {118}\) In a 1965 Festival press release, Balkind explained his choice of exhibitions:

So far, this has been a century that Genghis Khan might envy; and for those who are inclined to be Pollyanna about it, it might be suggested that they do a little detailed reading of recent history. It is no wonder that Bruce Conner's work is permeated, as Leider says, with the spirit "of the extermination camps, Hiroshima, horror comics, and sexual pathology" --

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\(^ {116}\) See Chapter Three for a discussion of Jack Spicer in relation to the Vancouver avant-garde.


\(^ {118}\) See Chapter Three for more on student protest and activism at UBC in the mid-1960s.
in other words, the entire list of social ills that continue to proceed from man's limitations and the lunacy of some of his institutions.\textsuperscript{119}

Conner used \textit{objets trouvés}, or more appropriately, \textit{objets perdus}, to construct his collages and assemblages.\textsuperscript{120} He used certain materials and themes almost obsessively in his works: pearls, rubber hose, feathers and mutilated nylon stockings. When these elements were juxtaposed, various themes emerged: death, sexual perversity and societal sickness.\textsuperscript{121} His exhibition in Vancouver, the result of a year-long correspondence with Balkind, featured five assemblages and six collages.\textsuperscript{122} Conner also screened three of his films - collages of documentary footage, discarded film reel and individual frames of random images.\textsuperscript{123}

Collage is perhaps the medium \textit{par excellence} of the “inter-face,” as Kiyooka defined it. In collage, the juxtaposition of disparate objects and images creates linguistic (semantic) and visual meaning through their jarring, overlapping and discontinuity.\textsuperscript{124} Dada and surrealist techniques used collage and assemblage, and with artists such as Stern and Conner, the dada lineage was re-ignited.\textsuperscript{125} Like a

\textsuperscript{119} Bruce Conner exhibition pamphlet, Fine Arts Gallery, UBC, Jan 1965. Balkind Series.
\textsuperscript{120} Located in a black suburb of Los Angeles, the Watts Towers, considered to be quintessential California assemblage, were built over the course of three decades and completed in 1954. Constructed of plates, bottles, shells, tiles and concrete, they are a testament to the locally-developed assemblage movement. Balkind borrowed an exhibition of photographs of the Watts Towers from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art for the 1963 Festival and displayed them in the UBC Fine Arts Gallery.
\textsuperscript{122} The exhibition was brought to Vancouver by Balkind after extensive correspondence with Conner (letters spanned Feb 1964 to Feb 1965, Balkind Series). It was organized by the Batman Gallery in San Francisco and circulated by WAAM. Works by Conner included: \textit{Holiness Temple In Christ}, collage; \textit{Blessed be thy Sweet Mercy}, collage; \textit{Ratbastard #1}, assemblage; \textit{Primavera}, collage; \textit{Clock}, assemblage; \textit{Deceitfish}, assemblage; \textit{Ask Tucker}, assemblage; \textit{Through the Window}; collage, \textit{Resurrection}, assemblage; \textit{Spider Lady House}, assemblage.
\textsuperscript{123} Three of Conner's films were shown on 2 February 1965: \textit{Cosmic Ray, A Movie}, and \textit{Report}.
\textsuperscript{124} Balkind organized an exhibition at the UBC Fine Arts Gallery in October 1964 entitled “Collage in the Sixties” that explored the re-emergence of dada and surrealist techniques of collage in the work of Iain Baxter, Kiyooka, Jack Shadbolt, and bissett. Exhibition Pamphlet, Balkind Series.
\textsuperscript{125} Reviews of Conner and Stern in \textit{Artforum} identify them both as having “dada roots,” vol. II, no. 6, Dec 1963, n. pag.
mosaic form, where a whole contains overlapping, colliding and complementing parts, dada-inspired collage uses text and ready-made objects such as newspapers and magazines. Conner’s first film *A Movie* uses left-over film strip that he purchased cheaply at a local film supply shop. Sutured together, Conner put the assembled film to random music that was playing on the radio. While Conner’s assemblages call up the satire and rage of the San Francisco beat scene, his filmmaking methods use techniques of chance. Conner articulated his interest in Cagean musical practices: “I performed with Terry Riley and LaMonte Young and other musicians who were doing experimental music events. I performed in a John Cage piece.” He used footage that was from discarded films, the debris of popular culture. The musical scores were randomly acquired and applied, resulting in cinematic collages of disjunctive meanings and images. However, Conner claimed that his initial approach to filmmaking was purely economical and that without being able to afford to buy a movie camera, he had to buy ready-made film. Thomas Crow describes California’s assemblage movement along a similar economic model:

> California artists, largely excluded from participation in any real art economy, were regularly drawn to the cheap disposability of collage and assemblage. On a cognitive level, they exploited these means in order to make sense of their own marginality, recycling the discards of post-war affluence into defiantly deviant reconfigurations.

West coast artists’ alienation from New York and international art centres was certainly a factor in their choice of materials. Without major institutional support or

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127 Also screened at the Festival were *Cosmic Ray* (1962) and *Report* (1965) both used found footage. *Cosmic Ray* included footage of a dancing girl collaged with military images to the music of Ray Charles. *Report* was about the media life of J.F. Kennedy and his assassination using repeated loops of images. For descriptions of Coner’s films, see Rebecca Solnit, *Secret Exhibition: Six California Artists of the Cold War Era* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1990), 120-1.
128 Ibid., 254.
an established network of gallery and private funding, artists lacked financial resources, but were also independent agents. While marginalization was an issue on one level, on the flip side, crucial environmental qualities were promoted, namely, isolation, independence and freedom.

California assemblage art drew on local practices such as beat-inspired social critique and Cagean notions of chance. Included in the Festival exhibition, *Rat bastard* # 1 referred to Conner’s self-proclaimed status as a “rat bastard.” Seeking to reject the by now mainstream term “beat,” Connor established the Rat Bastard Protective Society (RBP) - a play on the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (PRB). Conner also rejected most aspects of conventional art practice, from exhibition practices, signing of works and sales. His aesthetic was dadaesque in many ways, particularly in his belief in the end of art. Of *Rat bastard* #1, he said:

I dealt with it like it was a physical thing, this small square canvas, and I stuffed a bunch of nylon stockings in it so that it looked like its innards were coming out, wires and such, wrapped a nylon sock over the front of it, stuck a picture that I found in *Life* magazine of a cadaver lying on a table, and after it was all finished, it was a full three-dimensional thing. There was no real reason to hang it on the wall as an art object, so I put a handle on it, a cloth handle, so that I could carry it around and put it on display any time I wanted to.

Conner’s exhibition helped to secure a place for the discourses of the visual avant-garde in Vancouver and represented the diverse practices of the west coast. Bringing together beat aesthetics, the theories of McLuhan, collage, and Cagean notions of

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130 Cândida Smith, 169. Membership RBPS included Joan Brown, Jay DeFeo, Wally Hedrick and Wallace Berman.

131 During the 1960s, pre-Raphaelitism had a revival in both the UK and in North America, when the 19th century painters were celebrated for their scandalous love lives, free sexuality, and interdisciplinary efforts in both painting and poetry. The pre-raphealite journal *Germ* was analyzed in literary reviews and large-scale exhibitions surveyed the work and lives of the PRB. The link between the culture of the San Francisco Renaissance and the culture of the Pre-Raphaelites is a provocative research idea. While dada formations are the most frequent comparisons with Californian bohemianism and Vancouver cultural production in the 1960s, English pre-Raphaelitism may provide an equally, if not more, appropriate comparison.

132 Conner quoted in Solnit, 61.
indifference and chance, Conner's exhibition at the 1965 Festival marked the fullness, diversity and inter-disciplinarity of west coast art production.

In this chapter, I have argued that Vancouver was a site of the cross-fertilization of poetics and art and that this process or, more pointedly, space, was central to the aesthetics of the west coast. Vancouver offered the venue of a university campus to bring together cultural producers in all media. The Festivals of the Contemporary Arts not only brought together diverse aesthetics and practitioners, they also initiated, secured and sustained the west coast milieu through the personal connections that were made there. In my analysis of the first five years of the Festival, there is an under-representation of local (Vancouver) producers. The programs largely consisted of California poets and artists. In this sense, Vancouver seems like an American projection – a California avant-garde seeking to expand its project of freedom and isolation, or a manifestation of American expansionism in Canada. However, at the Festivals, American cultural hegemony was critically analyzed as both a dominant and productive force. Avant-garde artists in Vancouver were participants in a space of cross-fertilization that shaped their practices and rooted them in the artistic modes of the west coast. If they joined an “American” avant-garde, it was an avant-garde that imagined itself to be free of national designations. The University of British Columbia, at least within certain departments, provided institutional support and a context for experimentation and transnational discussion.

In the next and final chapter, I will analyze a group of Vancouver avant-garde artists who emerged within the context of the Festival of the Contemporary Arts around 1965, including Iain Baxter, Ian Wallace, Michael Morris, and Gary Lee-Nova. Open form poetics and pragmatism were central on the west coast and in art
criticism and had particular resonance in journals such as *Artforum*. By 1965, the “pacific nation” had materialized as a concrete form. Simon Fraser University opened and San Francisco poets Robin Blaser and Jack Spicer were pivotal figures in the continuation of Vancouver as a poetry producing locality. A spectrum of experimental studios and galleries operated in Vancouver and collaborations continued across neighbourhoods – across *Tish*, UBC, *blew ointment*, and the Vancouver Art Gallery. Similarly, collaboration across borders continued, and while Vancouver maintained an intimate relationship with the poetics of the San Francisco movement, Los Angeles also became a site of productive exchange with Vancouver as the discourses around language and pop art resonated in both cities.
CHAPTER THREE

Utopia in Vancouver, 1965-68:  
The Probable Union of Dada, Zen, and American Pragmatism ¹

Vancouver is an earthly paradise that I could and must escape to.

- Jack Spicer ²

I doubt that language can clarify art – as hundreds of issues of Artforum have shown. Yet I think we must always try while we are waiting for Godot.

- Alvin Balkind ³

In 1963, Vancouver was declared a “cultural backwater” by the protagonist in Larry Kent’s film The Bitter Ash. However, by 1969 the city had become one of the most desirable destinations for visual artists and art critics across North America, including Robert Smithson and Lucy Lippard. Earlier, in 1967, the Canada Council recognized Vancouver as an emerging centre for vanguard art with an unprecedented grant that led to the formation of the artist collective Intermedia. While Vancouver had already established itself as a site of avant-garde poetry with the Poetry Conference in 1963 and with diverse expressions of open form poetics at the Festival of the Contemporary Arts, it must be asked: how did a visual avant-garde form here?

In this chapter, I argue that the production of visual art and poetry were not separate but rather intersecting practices. This assertion runs counter to the accepted

¹ New York art critic Barbara Rose positioned John Cage as the source of American post-war neo-dada art and identified his aesthetics as rooted in the “improbable alliance” of dada, Zen and American pragmatism. “Problems of Criticism, V: The Politics of Art Part II,” Artforum (vol. 7, no. 5, Jan 1969), 47. This chapter sets out to illustrate how this union of seemingly diverse methodologies was not only philosophically consistent but also at the root of the west coast avant-garde.

² Letter from Jack Spicer to Ellen Tallman, 23 Feb 1965. Contemporary Literature Collection, Simon Fraser University.

version of Vancouver art history as Scott Watson has outlined in “The Generic City and its Discontents: Vancouver Accounts for Itself.” In constructing a genealogy of the “defeatured landscape,” an urban semiotic that has continued to inform Vancouver artists to the present, Watson dismisses the early and mid-sixties as a time when “the usual glut of candy-coloured fiberglass and epoxy-resin” objects were being produced and re-iterates that the late 1960s were the beginning of “critical” Vancouver art. Maintaining the Dan Graham/Robert Smithson effect, Watson writes, “the most important American artists of the period were Robert Smithson, Dan Graham, and Yvonne Rainer. It was from their example that art with a critical edge began to be produced.” Citing New York as the source for Vancouver artists and only briefly acknowledging the significance of the west coast culture of poetry, Watson mentions that, “in other respects” Black Mountain was a cultural touchstone for Vancouver poetry that was influenced by Robert Duncan, Robin Blaser, and Jack Spicer.

Like Watson, I identify the early sixties as the moment when Vancouver turned away from regional art practices, such as romantic landscape representation, and towards international movements, including pop phenomena and an interest in technology. However, I am arguing that New York was not the major source of critical art production in Vancouver. Vancouver art developed from practices and connections on the west coast that provided context, source, theory, as well as infrastructural and institutional support. (Of course, New York played a role in 1960s art discourses in Vancouver, not least because of its hegemonic position as the centre of modern art but also because of its sheer capacity to exhibit, support and publish

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Most importantly, however, I am arguing that Vancouver poetry was not the “other aspect” of Vancouver cultural life, distant and unrelated to the visual production. The poetry movement, based largely in the San Francisco Renaissance, was interconnected in a fundamental way with the visual arts.\(^5\)

The development of the visual avant-garde in Vancouver can be traced through the following phases: first, the carving out of a utopian liminal space – the west coast and specifically Vancouver as “paradise”; second, emptying this space of tradition, specifically the rejection of European aesthetics; and third, the building of new artistic paradigms within this space. The new artistic practices used open form poetics as a major source and adapted them from their American context (primarily Californian) to operate in Vancouver as a Canadian rejection of European philosophical idealism. The uniqueness of the Canadian university context and diverse art and language practices, including poetry, sculpture, happenings, dance, film, and painting, gave Vancouver specificity within the west coast milieu. Three main themes and ideas will be identified and analyzed as major factors in the formation of the Vancouver avant-garde: the curatorial practice of Alvin Balkind; the west coast milieu as the main social and cultural impetus; and, the driving philosophical and critical discourses that were part of pragmatism and open form poetics.

The determination and curatorial practice of Alvin Balkind was pivotal to the formation of a new avant-garde in Vancouver. An American expatriate, he embraced American modernism and nurtured intellectual and personal intimacy with colleagues

\(^5\) While the presence of American new poets and open form poetics is mentioned by commentators in relation to Vancouver art production, the interconnection has never been analyzed. For example, New Poetry, referred to as “the poetic commotion” of Blaser, Spicer, and Duncan, had an enduring influence in Vancouver, yet it has not been brought to bear on visual production. See “A Dance with Orpheus,” in *Collapse* 2, 21.
in San Francisco and Los Angeles in particular. However, Balkind's dedication to Vancouver was paramount. He hardly disguised his ambition to transform Vancouver into a serious art-producing locale and this was revealed through his work on the Festivals, the New Design Gallery, the Vancouver Art Gallery, and especially the Fine Arts Gallery at the University of British Columbia. Philip Leider of *Artforum* acknowledged Balkind's pivotal role in Vancouver:

> Perhaps the most knowledgeable and supportive figure on the current Vancouver scene is Alvin Balkind...If there is a single archive of the art history of the present and recent past in Vancouver, it is in the head of Alvin Balkind.

Balkind led the way for a new avant-garde formation in Vancouver and as an "initiator of discourse" he gave voice to a new generation of artists in the city. As Russell Jacoby has noted, in "the lives of intellectuals – of all individuals – it just takes several friends to make the difference; and these friends can meet in a coffeehouse or a bookstore...Bohemia can be this small, this vital." In addition to being a relentless champion of local art, pedagogue, curator, and writer, Balkind was also a critic. His critical voice, though smaller in scale than his New York

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6 While I focus on the role of Warren Tallman and Balkind, both expatriates in Vancouver, I do not mean to imply that it was only American modernism that drove and emboldened local avant-garde activity. Rather, I am arguing that these figures nurtured a specific intellectual and artistic climate which in turn enabled local Vancouver artists to explore their own social and artistic agency.

7 In response to a letter from Jean-Paul Morisset, Director of Extension Services at the National Gallery of Canada, who questioned the standards of the Fine Arts Gallery at UBC, Balkind wrote: "This gallery puts on an exhibition program which is far more adventurous, far higher in quality and far more impressive than the space would seem to suggest. But I refuse to be intimidated by space. I challenge it just as I challenge accepted notions on the arts, in philosophy and in life. I cannot and will not accept small-mindedness. I will not reduce what goes on here in a passive and acquiescent manner." 30 April 1968, Balkind Series.

8 As Leider explained, with no real art economy Balkind faced a lack of financial support. Despite this fact, Balkind's productivity was in large part due to his extensive personal letter-writing and his continual invitations to diverse cultural figures to visit Vancouver. Leider wrote: "Balkind works with the impossible handicap of an absurdly small budget; many of the important art events that occur (with remarkable frequency) at the university gallery go without documentation, publicity, or extensive notice..." Leider quoted by Stan Persky in "Balkind's basement filled with joy," unknown publication, 1967.

counterparts, nonetheless had the same vital role in the development of Vancouver art.

Balkind's critical voice as seen in his exhibition pamphlets and catalogues, while small in both length and distribution, went beyond descriptive or light-weight treatments of local art production. His critical methodology and approach to artistic production were grounded in American pragmatism. Philosophical pragmatism, expounded in the writing of Charles Saunders Peirce, William James, John Dewey, and recently continued by Richard Rorty and Cornel West, rejects idealism in philosophy and, rather than eliminating the Cartesian subject, revises it to find human agency within the autonomous subject. Pragmatism has claimed status as the first American philosophy, one in search of ostensibly democratic values. Its purpose was and is to deconstruct hegemonic regimes of thought and hierarchical systems in order to allow for alternative methodologies and approaches. As the word implies, the pragmatist also uses introspection, deliberation, and facts in search of "truth." In the domain of culture, specifically within the post-modern context, pragmatism has been a particularly provocative model because of its belief in the ever-changing nature of culture. In a type of bricolage, a pragmatic approach investigates cultural paradigms, critiques them and re-builds them.¹⁰

Balkind's role as a critic also needs to be understood within the context of Clement Greenberg's critical dominance in North American art discourses. By the early 1960s, Greenberg's formalist criticism came under fire from many critics who believed that North American post-war culture and art production could no longer be adequately considered and critiqued by European models, specifically by Kantian...
notions of taste. Barbara Rose, Max Kozloff, Lawrence Alloway\textsuperscript{11} and, in Vancouver, Balkind, turned to pragmatism as a new model for cultural critique. However, far from constructing a counter-Greenbergian history of Vancouver art, I want to instead argue for a “modernist visibility” that permeated diverse art practices where vision was explored and challenged. In *Eyesight Alone: Clement Greenberg’s Modernism and the Bureaucratization of the Senses*, Caroline Jones presents a particularly useful critical history of Greenberg. While Greenberg’s texts lend themselves to analysis using Marx, Freud, Althusser, Foucault, and Lacan in relation to late capitalism – psychoanalysis, performativity, and ideology – Jones argues that Greenberg must be read in terms of visuality. Using the term “modernist visibility,” Jones explains how Greenbergian aesthetics were part of broader artistic and social discourses on space and power relations in which modernity was internalized through vision and visuality. They were part of a larger post-war phenomenon that Jones names the “bureaucratization of the senses,” a process that occurred over time in which human experience was reduced and intensified.\textsuperscript{12} In the emerging era of syntheticism, artificiality, and simulacra, eyesight gained new and profound social, political, and

\textsuperscript{11} The break-down of formalism was the crux of a significant amount of art criticism by a nexus of art writers including Harold Rosenberg, Susan Sontag, Rose, Kozloff, and Alloway, and across various publications such as *Artforum*, *Art International*, *Art in America* and *Art News*. The art critics who challenged Greenberg objected to three main ideas in formalist modernism. First, formalist painting was essentialist; that is, in its self-referential and medium-specific composition it claimed an essential quality. For an increasing number of critics, essentialism of any kind was no longer acceptable as consumer capitalism and mass media communications had blurred divisions between people and spaces. Second, the notion of “purity” in Greenberg’s formulation maintained the division between high and low culture where “kitsch” was low culture and modernist painting “genuine culture.” They rejected “purity” and instead supported art that allowed for the “common object.” Last, Greenberg’s formula for evaluating art was based on fixed ideals such as quality and value. In the context of post World War II technological globalism, his critics found these criteria to be inadequate to deal with art that used simulacra and readymades. Sylvia Harrison, *Pop Art & The Origins of Post-modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 32-4.

personal functions; the latter perhaps the most significant as individual subjectivities were in part formed by visual information.

The “Greenberg effect,” described by Jones as being at the core of several far-reaching and variously interpreted artistic practices, was operating in Vancouver in the 1960s. Greenberg’s theories on painting had a bi-coastal impact and although Vancouver artists did not engage with him directly, his critical power informed many approaches. For example, while Roy Kiyooka was trained in and taught formalist painting, he simultaneously questioned its applicability to personal, political, and spiritual aspects of art. In this sense, he investigated several angles of visuality, sometimes rejecting, sometimes accepting, but still working within the terms of the aesthetic question. Jones writes: “on opposite sides of the continent, both aspiring artists and established ones were tunneling through the same stratum – a modernist visibility articulated in Greenbergian terms.”

In Vancouver, Greenberg’s terms were repeated, challenged, and undermined as in Kiyooka’s Untitled from 1967 where shaded discs are elevated from the flat surface of the canvas creating dimensionality. Symmetry and over-all balance are maintained but the discs lift off the canvas to challenge its autonomy. The ovals instead become symbols of something else – spirituality, Zen – their potency comes from elsewhere, outside of formalist dictum.

On the west coast, artists, critics, and curators were engaged with the breakdown of formalism. Specifically, the dramatically new social and cultural conditions brought on by mass communications and media meant that painting in terms of formalist practice alone was no longer seen as valid. This was demonstrated by the

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13 Jones, xxv.
14 As I discussed in Chapter One, Kiyooka was a poet, painter, photographer and teacher. His poetic practices were informed by Charles Olson and although his paintings evidenced a formalist control of composition and colour, his philosophy was guided by the openness of cultural exchange and kinetic verse.
California pop art show *Six More* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1963 that elicited nation-wide critical attention and marked a west (and east) coast dedication to pop. In 1964, the critical failure of Greenberg's *Post Painterly Abstraction* exhibition also at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art signaled the operation of the "Greenberg effect" on the west coast.\(^{15}\) Although it was poorly received, the exhibition not only re-invigorated dialogue on modern art practices but also strengthened the rivalry between California and New York.\(^{16}\) With Vancouver as a participant on the west coast, these dialogues were made more complex as they broadened to include transnationalism and local artistic histories.

Open form poetics in particular challenged traditional modernist poetry and visual arts. Projective verse translated into new modes in film and dance with artists such as Stan Brakhage and Merce Cunningham, as evidenced in Vancouver at the Festival of the Contemporary Arts.\(^{17}\) Balkind was pivotal in securing open form poetics in Vancouver, specifically in his capacity as a director of the Festival. He was also an active member of the Western Association of Art Museums (WAAM) of which he was elected vice-president in 1964. Making frequent trips down the coast to San Francisco and Los Angeles to attend the annual general meetings, Balkind's connections included contemporary art world figures such as curator Walter Hopps, gallery director Rolf Nelson, and artists Jess Collins and Judy Gerowitz (Chicago).

Balkind's involvement in both open form poetics and pragmatist discourses laid the foundations for Vancouver visual art production. The intermingling of


\(^{16}\) Canadian artists included in Post Painterly Abstraction were Jack Bush, Kenneth Lochhead, and A.F. McKay. *Post Painterly Abstraction*, Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1964.

\(^{17}\) See Chapter Two for a history of The Festival of the Contemporary Arts between 1961 and 1968.
process philosophy and pragmatism in Vancouver created a sound philosophical paradigm for artistic production. The two philosophies are intertwined schools of thought – both Whitehead and Dewey held that experience was the foremost premise for knowledge. In this sense, both process philosophy and pragmatism can be understood as anti-Kantian, or at least challenging Kant, in the rejection of idealism and objective truth. Both favoured realism over idealism and fallibilism over intuition. In Vancouver, this was repeatedly demonstrated in the rejection of expressionist painting and in the challenge to Greenbergian formalism. Furthermore, and crucial to the development of North American post-war avant-garde formations, process philosophy and pragmatism each mounted a self-conscious counter-attack against European traditional philosophy (by which they were both marginalized in academia from the 1960s).  

Structured around a tight chronology of events and exhibitions between 1965 and 1968, this chapter attempts to explain how and why an avant-garde formed in Vancouver, with particular focus on the specificity of its west coast context. It consists of five sections, each representing five artistic events that were significant to the formation of the Vancouver avant-garde: San Francisco poet Jack Spicer’s infamous Vancouver Lectures (1965); the exhibition Beyond Regionalism at the UBC Fine Arts Gallery (1965); the 1966 Festival of the Contemporary Arts; the exhibition Joy and Celebration at the UBC Fine Arts Gallery (1967); and concluding with the exhibition The West Coast Now at the Portland Art Museum (1968).  

19 This constellation of events represents artistic practices that ran counter to the majority of the exhibitions held at the Vancouver Art Gallery in the early to mid-sixties that promoted the established regional school of painters, including Jack Shadbolt, Gordon Smith, and Don Jarvis. For a history of exhibitions at the Vancouver Art Gallery, see Vancouver: Art and Artists, 1931-1983, Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1983.
1965: Jack Spicer, Utopia, and the Vancouver Community of Poetry

In February 1965, Jack Spicer read from his book *Language* at the Festival of the Contemporary Arts. Concurrent with Bruce Conner and his beat-inspired assemblages, Spicer represented the poetics of the San Francisco Renaissance, a phenomenon that had a profound role in the shaping of the emerging Vancouver avant-garde. A player in the California junk movement at the Six Gallery in San Francisco along with Wallace Berman, George Herms, and Conner, Spicer’s poetry incorporated diverse sources – folklore, pop culture, populist, esoteric, and religious – sometimes all in one poem. As noted in Chapter Two, California assemblage was epitomized in Rodia’s towers that used local industrial material and in Conner’s assemblages that appropriated media and objects from post-war consumerism. Spicer similarly took bits of material culture to put together linguistic mosaics. The University of British Columbia alternative newspaper *The Artisan* commented on Spicer’s visit:

Spicer is a legendary person in avant-garde American poetry. With Robert Duncan and Robin Blaser, he was a leading figure in a revolt during the late 1940s against academic poetry at the University of California. The influential San Francisco school of poetry emerged from this revolt with Spicer as a chief revolutionary and conscience ever since - a poet who has exerted barbed intelligence, integrity and wit…

Spicer, in turn, was enraptured with Vancouver and wrote to Warren Tallman, “I got more from my three days Vancouver (spiritual bread) than I’ve gotten in the last two years in San Francisco.” Four months later, in May 1965, Spicer returned

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20 Spicer claimed his birth year to be 1946, the year he met Robert Duncan and Robin Blaser at Berkeley. Spicer taught history at the California School of Fine Art in San Francisco and was also part of the “six” of The Six Gallery where Ginsberg read *Howl*. Peter Gizzi, *The House that Jack Built: the Collected Lectures of Jack Spicer* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1998), xx-xxiv.

21 *The Artisan* (vol. 4, no. 5, 1 Feb 1965), n. pag.

22 Letter from Spicer to W. Tallman, 20 April 1965. Contemporary Literature Collection, SFU.
to Vancouver when Balkind invited him, Stan Persky, and Robin Blaser to read their recent work at the New Design Gallery. Blaser and Persky became permanent Vancouver residents and Spicer stayed on as a guest of Tallman to deliver his Vancouver Lectures in June and July 1965.

The three lectures took place at the Tallman residence between 13 June and 14 July at the cost of two dollars each or five dollars for the series. The lectures were intense interactive discussions requiring knowledge of Spicer's work and his vast poetic sources, including William Carlos Williams, Olson, Duncan, Pound, Donne, Blake, Stein, Ovid, Homer, and Arnold to name a few. Between fifteen and twenty-five people attended, including poet Dorothy Livesay, violinist Harry Adaskin and poets connected with Tish, such as Peter Auxier, George Bowering, Judith Copithorne, and Jamie Reid. Filmmakers and poets Sam Perry and Dennis Wheeler were also present. Spicer was an important figure for Tish, challenging the young poets and pushing them to recognize their poetic naïveté. Specifically, Spicer encouraged the poets to find what he termed their own voice and to resist imitations or importations of American new poetry. Elusive, contradictory and non-didactic, he also reflected on himself. About one of his own poems, he questioned:

How can the [my] poem be so Canadian (like the packages of cigarettes or kleenex) when all the poems I've seen in Tish were packaged like American cigarettes or American kleenex?  

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23 Gizzi, xxii.
24 Spicer's poetic knowledge was encyclopedic and his poetry was complex. It refused stable meaning and alluded to theology, politics, poetry, history, love, and death. Spicer's intertextuality is the subject of Gizzi's analysis and one of his main arguments is that Spicer's work needs a method or practice of reading. See "Jack Spicer and the Practice of Reading," in The House that Jack Built, 173-228.
25 Dennis Wheeler was a student of English and Art History at the University of British Columbia from approximately 1965 to 1971. In addition to studying poetry, he also wrote literary and poetic reviews for The Ubyssey, independent art criticism, and in 1971, he completed his MA thesis in Art History entitled Kasimir Malevich and Suprematism: Art in the Context of Revolution. Wheeler's participation in Spicer's Vancouver Lectures indicates an early interest in revolutionary or at least, radical artistic practices.
26 Letter from Spicer to E. Tallman, 23 Feb 1965. Contemporary Literature Collection, SFU.
For Spicer, the issue of the local in an age of corporatism was central to his radical poetry. While *Tish* poetics were theoretically based in American modernism, the poetry represented an intangible Canadian-ness. For him, Vancouver was “paradise,” continuing California’s utopian promise of freedom up the coast of the Pacific.  

The *Canadian* Pacific was even more desirable largely because it was free from government sanctioned violence in Vietnam and military conscription.

I have identified three main themes in the Vancouver Lectures that relate to the avant-garde milieu in Vancouver, particularly to its development as a liminal space or utopian city. The first is what Blaser has termed “the practice of Outside,” a concept central to Spicer’s poetry but pertinent also to artistic issues in the city.  

For Spicer, “Outside” is a liminal ambivalent space created when the poet steps outside of the poem, creating a vacuum in which the poem is written. The poet writes backwards, posthumously, to the poets before him and, at the same time, towards the readers. The past and the future, what Spicer calls the Real, then floods the vacuum to occupy the space of the poem.

In *Language*, death represents the alterity of poetry, an X space that is frequently in the foreground of the Pacific Ocean:

> This ocean, humiliating in its disguises  
> Tougher than anything  
> No one listens to poetry. The ocean  
> Does not mean to be listened to…  
> It pounds the shore. White and aimless signals. No  
> One listens to poetry.

While his formulation suggests a critique of romantic regionalism and even west coast Zen, the ocean is a touchstone for Spicer’s west coast location, both

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27 It is likely that Spicer would have continued his association with Vancouver but he died just one month after his last Vancouver lecture at the age of forty.  
29 Gizzi, 175.  
geographically and psychically. For him, the Pacific Ocean exists across human death and war; its *sounds* are heard – but "no one listens to poetry." Spicer called for a community of poetry and for "not selling-out." In Vancouver, he found "paradise," where people did listen to poetry and where he found his "spiritual bread." Blaser has noted: "Jack's voice remained...outside the paradise or city of its concern because such a city is outside our time or at the edge of it."\(^{31}\) For the American poets, and for Balkind and Tallman, the city existed on the outside edge of time and in between two nations – perhaps Vancouver was the vacuum into which the Real could flood.

The second theme is Vancouver as a paradise, where the city is the primary construction in the cross-temporal framework of the Outside. In *The Maximus Poems*, Gloucester speaks through Charles Olson. In the Vancouver Lectures, Spicer builds Vancouver, a process "literalized in the imaginary construction of Vancouver from the baselines of a baseball diamond."\(^{32}\) Baseball was a leitmotif in Spicer's work. He used it to represent the field of composition using populist, athletic imagery. In baseball, a pragmatist symbol of American (not necessarily Canadian) democracy, a player transcends his social standing. The game takes place at the edge of time, without a clock, until the plays are made. He read from *Book of Magazine Verse* on Vancouver:

> We shall build our city backwards from each baseline...
> We shall clear the trees back, the lumber of our pasts and and futures back, because we are on a diamond, because it is our diamond.
> Pushed forward from.
> And our city shall stand as the lumber rots and Runcible mountain crumbles, and the ocean, eating all of the islands, comes to meet us.\(^{33}\)

\(^{31}\) Blaser quoted in Gizzi, 183.
\(^{32}\) Gizzi, 194. For an analysis of Spicer's use of baseball, see 196-9.
\(^{33}\) Spicer quoted in Gizzi, 195.
Spicer “clear-cuts” Vancouver to empty it of nature as well as its history of ecological destruction. The Pacific Ocean washes away Vancouver’s land and history. For Spicer, it is the city’s most definitive force providing the power necessary to empty, clear and free Vancouver so that the city can re-shape itself into a construction of equality and balance. The city has become a diamond, where fair play and equality within a social group operate within timeless narrative.

The third theme, a continuation of the second, is the idea of the west coast as an alternative community of image production. The Pacific delineated both a geographic and temporal edge. Old growth-trees and Indigenous cultures marked the “oldness” of the west coast while the emptying of these simultaneously marked its youth. Peter Gizzi remarks on this doubleness in Spicer’s conception of California:

It represents a limit: the geographical limit of the West, the ocean the sunset, The End. At this extremity is a defining narrative of American geographical conquest and media-expansion, it is a narrative based in repetition. The narrative of the edge becomes caught in its own echoes and the re-iteration of temporary endings: the repeated projection of cultural icons, the crash of the surf, the fade-out, etc.

For Spicer, California was antipodal to the east coast – it was the “seacoast of bohemia.” Throughout the Vancouver Lectures, Spicer talked the profound emptiness of Vancouver, but also about the west coast as richer, older, as “the other end of the rabbit hole,” a place where you could dig and “fall into China.” He thought the Pacific should be the extreme limit of a separate country – a “post-apocalyptic, image-making, border culture.” Vancouver, Spicer’s paradise, invited this “narrative of the edge” up the coast into Canada where the debris of the past and the future readers of poetry could co-exist.

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34 “Runcible” is from Edward Lear’s “The Owl and the Pussycat,” rendering a feeling of geographic fantasy in the poem.
35 Gizzi, 203.
36 Gizzi, 201.
The Pacific Ocean marked the edge of a coastline of utopias. For Spicer, Balkind, Blaser, and Tallman – all American-born – Vancouver’s potential as a paradise lay in both its closeness with the United States but equally in its political distance from it. The utopian potential of Vancouver was located in “the university,” specifically the University of British Columbia and Simon Fraser University. In lieu of San Francisco’s bohemian cafés, the universities gathered American expatriates who believed that the radical cultural power of American modernism, particularly open form poetics that included Black Mountain and projective and beat poetry, could effect social change. The university offered the possibility of artistic and cultural transformation where the past was released and new paradigms could be constructed. Students strove towards this with exuberance, first challenging institutional power relations and second, fighting for their own agency. They sought to protect freedom of protest and speech and battled for tolerance of expressions of sexuality and drugs.

The little bohemia led by Balkind and Tallman at the University of British Columbia bloomed even within the growing bureaucratization and physical expansion of the institution. With John MacDonald as the University President reporting to social credit Premier W.A.C. Bennett who in turn responded to fiscal initiatives of the liberal federal government, students began to articulate their sense of frustration and alienation. When Bennett received a nineteen million dollar operating grant to distribute between the new Simon Fraser University, UBC, and Victoria College in early 1965, students became enraged with the UBC President when he proposed fee increases later that year. The Ubyssey consistently published editorials on these

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37 Simon Fraser University opened in September 1965. Designed by Vancouver architect Arthur Erickson (a previous invitée at the Festival of the Contemporary Arts), the university was meant to embody harmony, both in its architectural volumes and spaces and also in its liberal and progressive academics. Robin Blaser joined the English department in 1966 and from there wrote The Pacific Nation.
events, including in satirical cartoons by Jeff Wall. In a cartoon from February 18, 1965, Wall drew Bennett as a wily dog-trainer who, flaunting a steak over the heads of three dogs, demanded, "Now, sit up and beg." The vignette allegorized MacDonald’s desperate petition to Bennett for a fair share of the grant in order to accommodate salary increases for faculty. In turn, MacDonald was also criticized when he failed to address the entire student body to explain the proposed fee hikes.

Wall satirized him as Marie Antoinette who, reclining in her royal regalia and reading a newspaper with student protests as the headline story, declared "Let them eat cake." Wall’s cartoon reframed the students’ rage within a revolutionary context where students were fighting for republican values against a ruling monarchy.

Models of collective revolt, including the contemporary Berkeley protests, ignited student activism on campus. With plans for a new student union building (funded by the provincial grant) there were new meeting spaces and legitimacy to student government and organizations. Advocating non-violence, students were calling for increased cooperation between the student body and administration. On National Student Day on October 27, 1965, over one half of the Canadian students who marched were from the University of British Columbia.

In addition to active protesting, students also explored social dimensions of empowerment. For example, the right to birth control became a heated debate that played out on the pages of The Ubyssey and sexuality, while remaining a taboo subject, was also a topic being increasingly exposed. For example, one of Wall’s cartoons from September 30, 1965 draws a young male student pondering the

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38 *The Ubyssey*, 18 Feb 1965, 1.
39 Wall signed this cartoon with the dictum “Money is the root of all evil.” *The Ubyssey*, 21 Sept 1965.
40 *The Ubyssey* printed proposed plans for new student Union building, 21 Jan 1965.
41 *The Ubyssey* (28 Oct 1965), 5.
influence of contemporary literature on his girlfriend. Perturbed by her impressionability, the student remarks how his girlfriend ran away to San Francisco after she read *On the Road*. However, he becomes increasingly delighted when he recalls the positive outcome of his girlfriend’s reading of the American soft-porn classic *Candy*. Wall’s cartoon was printed within the same weeks as the controversy around birth control was being editorialized and concurrently with the campus screening of Larry Kent’s sexually explicit film *Sweet Substitute*.

The University of British Columbia was a site of bureaucratic and government tensions, but also the home to academics, students, and a small group of poets and artists who vehemently believed in democratic liberties and the importance of critical activism. Certainly an expatriate like Balkind and an avant-garde poet such as Spicer viewed the campus as a paradise where possibilities were endless. In the midst of American student violence, war in Vietnam, and civil inequalities in the United States, the utopian promise of Vancouver was ripe. However, the 1960s as a utopian moment has become a clichéd notion, not to mention a misleading one. When heightened violence in Vietnam followed utopian movements in the early 1960s, utopianism was cast as naïve and futile, even dangerous. However, as Russell Jacoby argues, it is short-sighted to understand utopia as being followed by dystopia. Instead, both should be viewed as contemporaneous. He asserts that radicalism

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42 *The Ubyssey*, 30 Sept 1965.
43 Kent was a student and filmmaker at UBC and his films *Bitter Ash* (1963) and *Sweet Substitute* (1964) were screened on campus upon release and again in January 1965. See Chapter Two for a brief discussion of Kent in relation to west coast avant-garde filmmaking.
44 American expatriates and visitors served as catalysts in the development of the local intellectual and artistic milieu in Vancouver. Americans in particular, were drawn to Vancouver to avoid military conscription and also to be able to voice opposing or dissenting political and social positions for which they would be persecuted in the United States. However, it must also be noted that Canadian, British, and other international figures were also catalytic figures in Vancouver and at the University of British Columbia, such as B.C. Binning and Marshall McLuhan.
45 Ellen Peel challenges the dismissal of utopian ideals based on their perception as naïve, silly, fruitless and even immoral. Instead, she wants to re-formulate notions of utopia as more productive sites of analysis. Peel, 8-9.
vitalizes liberalism so that in the 1960s, anti-war protests, for example, perpetuated a
dialogue between radicalism and liberal democracy, strengthening both. In this sense,
utopianism on North American campuses should be re-framed as spurts of activity
and growth for both radicalism and liberalism, rather than futile attempts at idealism.

Understanding utopia as dynamic as opposed to static has been theorized by
feminist literary scholar Ellen Peel as “pragmatic utopianism.”46 Where static utopia
is a representation of perfection – unattainable and bound to fail – pragmatic utopia is
a process of critique in the present towards an ideal future. For pragmatic utopians,
the inability to attain an ideal society is not a failure because by its very definition
utopia does not exist. Instead, the utopian drive motivates change and constant
modification, progress rather than failure. Because pragmatic utopianism operates
through changes and stages, it can work to disassemble fixed binaries such
utopia/dystopia, good/evil, male/female.

I think this is a fruitful way of conceptualizing avant-garde art and poetry in
the 1960s, specifically in Vancouver. In the poetry of Blaser, Spicer, and Tish poets,
ideal cities were imagined where nature, spiritual travel, and freedom were embraced.
Energized by people such as Spicer, UBC students enacted pragmatic utopianism and
wanted to build Vancouver through experimentation and change. In Imaginary
Communities: Utopia, the Nation, and the Spatial Histories of Modernity, literary and
cultural theorist Phillip Wegner analyzes the role of utopianism in modernity, tracing
its trajectory through relations of space, subjectivity, and the nation-state. He writes:

The utopia’s imaginary community is not only a way
of imagining subjectivity, but also a way of imagining space,
thereby helping the nation-state to become both the agent and locus
of much of modernity’s history.47

46 Ibid., xix.
47 Wegner, xvii.
As discussed in the first chapter, the west coast imagined itself as a distinct nation constituted by relations between its cities, its specific histories, Indigenous populations, and the Pacific Ocean – subjectivities that were defined within these cultural and spatial matrices. Literary and artistic practices on the west coast mapped out this terrain and in turn, poetic and visual representations of “west coast utopia” transformed space into a “real” place. What emerged was a sense of regional identity based on imagined communities (this process in which represented relations become “real” has been variously termed interpolation, semiosis, and the performance of discourse). Thus, the utopian ideals of the west coast in the 1960s should not be dismissed. Rather, they must be recognized as doing significant symbolic and cultural work, ultimately creating the “pacific nation.”

1965: Beyond Regionalism

Spicer’s visit, student activism, and a desire to carve out a climate of possibilities translated into a drive for freedom from the constraints of tradition and from colonial regimes and systems of thought. Balkind’s exhibition Beyond Regionalism in October 1965 was motivated by this drive. Including works by Iain Baxter, Claude Breeze, Brian Fisher, Ann Kipling, David Mayrs, Gary Lee-Nova, Marianna Schmidt, and Jack Wise at the Fine Arts Gallery at the University of British Columbia, the exhibition was part of the larger social and political shifts that were taking place on campus, in Vancouver and on the west coast. For his part, Balkind was articulating the complex aspects of these shifts. Specifically, he outlined fresh

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48In relation to the construction of the west coast, another productive concept of utopianism is Michel Foucault’s formulation of heterotopia. Heterotopia and pragmatic utopia are similar in several ways. For example, both: 1) consist of several sites juxtaposed in one space; 2) are spatio-temporal constructs that break with traditional time, and; 3) are isolated and penetrable at the same time and embody their own rites. See M. Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” Diacritics (Spring 1986), 22-7.
parameters for artistic production that included, first and foremost, a rejection of
romantic landscape painting. "New art" dispelled heroic and lyrical modes of
landscape and replaced it with social, political, and spiritual dimensions of life.

Students at UBC, including many young artists, were absorbing the political
fallout from American intervention in Vietnam and trying to make sense of their
position as Canadians and members of the west coast. In November 1965, Lester
Pearson secured his second term as Prime Minister with a minority liberal
government and, although he continued to refrain from involvement in Vietnam,
relations between Canada and the United States strengthened for the first time since
World War II. John Diefenbaker, conservative Prime Minister during the Cuban
Missile Crisis, had been decidedly anti-American in foreign diplomacy and domestic
trade issues. Reluctant to comply with President Kennedy's call for backup on Cuba
in October 1962 and looking to Europe for increased trade, Diefenbaker wanted to
create more Canadian independence from the United States. In 1963, when Pearson
gained power, Canada and the US, under Lyndon Johnson, became closer partners.
Despite the tumultuous relationship between the two leaders, the Canada-United
States Auto Pact was signed in January 1965 which led to a dramatic decrease in
Canadian unemployment. Even though Canada refused to support American activity
in Vietnam and provided refuge to thousands of draft-dodgers during the crisis,
economic ties between the two countries strengthened. Published on November 9,
1965, the day after Pearson's re-election for a second term as Prime Minister, a
cartoon by Wall shows Pearson engaged in a friendly telephone call with Johnson
following his victory. As if picking up where he left off before the interruption of the

\[\text{footnote}\]

Although Pearson and Johnson had a strained relationship, mostly due to Pearson's refusal to support
the U.S. in Vietnam, the economic partnership strengthened. For a political and economic history of
the post-war years in Canada, see Erika Simpson, "The Principles of Liberal Internationalism
according to Lester Pearson," *Journal of Canadian Studies* (vol. 34, no. 1, Spring 1999), 64-77.
election, Pearson is quick to get back to business and asks, “Hello Lyndon? ...Now, where were we?...” The cartoon suggests a critique of the neighbours’ close relations and raises the question of Canada’s complicity in securing the post-war economic hegemony of the United States.

At UBC, while American foreign policy was reviled, American intellectual activity and its potential for radical change were embraced. Reciprocally, Americans saw Vancouver as a safe-haven from conscription and from their complicity in the atrocities of war. An example of this reciprocity on campus was the visit of Paul Krassner, editor of the New York political magazine The Realist, on October 20, 1965.50 Speaking to over six hundred students at UBC, Krassner condemned the Catholic Church, the prohibition of birth control, and the Vietnam War. He was particularly vocal on the polarization of the two ideologies of communism and capitalism and warned that anti-communism was an American obsession or witch-hunt that threatened human freedom. Despite being a dedicated demonstrator, he was also critical of anti-war protest. He addressed UBC students:

You have to stop the brutality and inhumanity before you think up an alternative. A kid who has just been burned out of his village doesn’t care about a teach-in. We have really become callous in the United States.51

Krassner also did a written interview for The Ubyssey. Wall accompanied it with a full-page cartoon satirizing the North American fear of radical thought, specifically the “threat” of Krassner to the establishment.52 Caricatures of the pope, Edgar Hoover, the biblical Madonna and Child, Fidel Castro, and Bobby Kennedy declare that the Realist editor is “one of the greatest threats to civil liberties and fundamental

50 The Realist was a magazine of free speech, criticism, and satire. Krassner led teach-ins across the United States and had been active with Allen Ginsberg in demonstrations at Berkeley.
51 The Ubyssey (21 Oct 1965), 2.
52 The Ubyssey, 8 Oct 1965.
privacies of the individual.” Wall’s iconic figures flank images of sexually-explicit advertisements for the Volkswagon beetle and fabric softener with the tag lines “Does the stickshift scare your wife?” and “How to make a hard man a softie.” Wall transformed consumer products into sexualized symbols of power and desire. The caricatures of the world leaders, by contrast, were made to appear impotent.

The Vietnam War and Berkeley protests were at the forefront of reporting and student activism on campus. Many students condemned the political, economic, and military intervention in Vietnam and they rejected imperialist and colonial attitudes both globally and nationally. The Quebec separatist movement received coverage in The Ubyssey on both sides of the issue and the role of the British monarchy in federalist debate was declared obsolete. On the Queen’s visit to Quebec in early October 1965, one student journalist wrote: “The Queen should have stayed home...the purpose and ideals of Canadian unity at this time would have been better served in her absence.”

The Fine Arts Gallery was by no means removed from the fervor on campus. Balkind and emerging artists were participants and were concerned with artistic practice within the climate of activism. Beyond Regionalism signified a resounding rejection of romantic painting and with it, European traditionalism. In the 1950s, Jack Shadbolt, Alistair Bell, J.A.S. MacDonald, Don Jarvis, and Gordon Smith formed a loosely connected school of expressionistic “animistic” and figurative painters. They were acquainted with Seattle artists Morris Graves and Mark Tobey, two of the most prolific American painters on the Pacific coast and the foundation of the Ecole du Pacifique that worked towards being an alternative to the New York Abstract

53 The Ubyssey (14 Oct 1965), 1.
Expressionists. Both the Vancouver and Seattle painters were preoccupied with nature and its mystical tranquility and were united by their somewhat theosophic painterly abstraction. In 1965, at the time of Beyond Regionalism, the British Columbian landscape painters of the 1950s no longer held social or aesthetic currency. Balkind wrote:

> It was an art of lyricism, passion and occasional symbolism; its mystique was romantic, inescapably involved as it was with the omnipresent mountains, fjords, fogs, and rain forests of this part of the coast. Its intellectual basis was essentially School of Paris...with a background scrim – like a racial memory – on which was projected a slide of English Landscape Painting.

The “pacific school” gave way to the “pacific nation” and a concern for artistic composition and style was eclipsed by a desire to create an alternative social and cultural formation.

Young Vancouver painters no longer identified with lyrical landscape painting. Ian Wallace, writing for The Ubyssey, reviewed the work of J.A.S. MacDonald and Gordon Smith. MacDonald’s attempt to express existential loneliness, Wallace wrote, resulted in visual clichés due to technical ineptitude. He continued: “MacDonald’s problem is one of language. Whatever he is trying to say, he is incapable of saying it through painting.” His review of Smith, less scathing, revealed Wallace’s distaste for the genre: “There is little in Smith’s work which leads the viewer into any visual experience that does not smack of the deja-vu.” By

57 In addition to being an artist and a prolific art writer for The Ubyssey and for Vancouver news media, Wallace was a student in the Art History department at the University of British Columbia. An instructor in the department between 1967 and 1970, he completed his MA thesis (under the supervision of B.C. Binning) in 1968 entitled Piet Mondrian: The Evolution of his Neo-plastic Aesthetic 1908-1920. Similar to Wheeler, Wallace was interested in twentieth century European avant-garde artistic practices.
58 Wallace, “This guy’s so bad it’s sad,” The Ubyssey (26 Nov 1965), 12.
59 The Ubyssey (4 Nov 1966), 10.
contrast, the “plastic landscapes” of Iain Baxter in Beyond Regionalism were praised by Wallace who called them “nervy common objects...uncommon and enigmatic.”

Baxter included fifteen plastic or laminate “paintings” in the exhibition. B.C. Landscape was completely encased in plastic, an isolated synthetic landscape. The plastic de-romanticized the landscape transforming it into a banal object. The “clothing of our time,” Baxter called the plastic that wraps the electric age – “all that information running around the world through little plastic wires.” Baxter used plastic as if it were human skin – wrapped objects transformed from everyday things into extensions of humans. In keeping with Marshall McLuhan, he believed in the interconnectivity of entities, including humans, objects, and nature. Landscape, what had traditionally been a genre of expressionist and romantic painting, was re-worked in Baxter's plastic landscapes, such as Bagged Landscape. Through placing a “readymade” toy boat, real water, and a little plastic cloud in a transparent bag, Baxter transformed an otherwise traditional landscape into a plastic microcosm. A bagged landscape is transparent, therefore promoting awareness of both the superficiality of the landscape genre as well as the technological aspects of plastic that, for McLuhan and Baxter, are just as natural as “landscape.”

Balkind’s rejection of romantic landscape painting in favour of “new art” was justified by two main aspects in contemporary art discourses: 1) new art was based in internationalism; and 2) new art was grounded in a new dada concern for the everyday, common object. In part reflective of the theories of British art critic

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60 The Ubyssy (22 Oct 1965), 10.
61 It is not clear whether B.C. Landscape was included in Beyond Regionalism, however it closely resembles the exhibition’s Landscape with Cumulus Cloud, both from 1965.
62 Baxter in a taped interview, 6 Feb 1967, National Gallery of Canada Archives, Artist Files.
63 Philosophically, Baxter’s work denies Cartesian duality and recognizes sensory experience as fundamental to perception. In this sense, it can be read as anti-Greenbergian. However, as Caroline Jones points out, Greenberg’s aesthetics operated within broader discourses of visuality within the electric age. Baxter was engaged with McLuhan who was also concerned with the “bureaucratization of the senses.” Jones, xvii-xix.
Lawrence Alloway, the first aspect was in keeping with the idea that there is a “fine art-pop art continuum.” Balkind raised the problems around notions of high-art. By illuminating the common object, he wanted to challenge “elite views of art” while at the same time pointing to the new designation of art as communication. For Balkind, this was not solely an American phenomenon but rather a general condition of post-war urbanized cultures. In his essay for *Beyond Regionalism*, Balkind wrote:

> In the majority of the works, the landscape has disappeared, and with it any claims to regionalism. In its place, a new internationalism steps to the forefront. It has certain qualities which may be seen simultaneously in Los Angeles, Winnipeg, Chicago, Stockholm and Dusseldorf.

Diverse metropolitan areas were all plugged into a global media network and through air travel, instantaneous communications, internationally published art journals, and traveling exhibitions, any “cranny” of the world could be an art centre. Balkind asserted that the eight artists represented in the show were working within this global context.

Claude Breeze challenged high art by using a widely circulated image from the newspaper media – Otis Pruitt’s controversial photograph of a double lynching in Mississippi from 1935. In September 1965, *The Ubyssey* reproduced Pruitt’s image that had been re-created as a poster by the American Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Breeze’s painting *Sunday Afternoon: from an old*

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65 In “Transmission Difficulties: Vancouver Painting in the 1960s,” Watson incorrectly states that *Beyond Regionalism* took place in 1966, *Paint* (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 2006), 15. This is important because the exhibition established a strong local scene that was based in international avant-garde discourses.


67 While there is a partially comprehensive list of works from this exhibition, it is not clear if Breeze’s painting was included in *Beyond Regionalism* even though it is consistent with the exhibition dates and Wallace’s review.
American Photograph reproduced the graphic image of the hanging against a background pastoral landscape in an emotionally-charged palette of bright yellow and green. Breeze not only identified himself with North American student activism, but also violently subverted the previously lyrical landscape genre with human atrocity. Wallace wrote of the image:

> We look into the maps of their faces for signs of the elusive self within, that slips out of focus at the moment of recognition, of the cold horror.\(^{68}\)

The second critical aspect of “new art” was its use of the everyday as source and subject matter. Barbara Rose wrote that the new generation of artists “uses the content of life [but] stands apart from it – amused, detached.”\(^{69}\) Rose referred to these practitioners as “new dada” for their use of readymades; that is, objects from the commercial and consumer realm. Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, and Andy Warhol, for example, re-created objects that, in juxtaposition with life, forced viewers to evaluate both art and life together. Balkind thus contrasted the artists in Beyond Regionalism to the previous generation of regional landscape painters with their romantic and emotive expression, arguing that the new artists possessed an attitude that was “cooler, more detached.”\(^{70}\) Balkind’s essay brought art and life into play. Vancouver artists, he wrote, were responding to a “world nearly overcome by political and social convulsions, conjoined to the wild, galloping horses of technology and science.” Using synthetic materials such as plastic and readymade objects, Balkind asserted that Vancouver artists responded with “irreverence, humour, frank sensuality, anti-heroics, and anti-monumentality.”\(^{71}\)

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70 Balkind, Beyond Regionalism, exhibition press release, 24 Sept 1965, Balkind Series.
71 Ibid., n. pag.
Balkind quoted Rose with frequency in his texts. She was prolific and accessible but she also provided a model for new methodologies in art criticism, specifically a return to dada as a way to counter Greenbergian formalism. A brief comparative analysis of Rose and Balkind reveals the extent of Balkind’s engagement with American art discourses but also the specificity of his position in Vancouver. Balkind’s critical approach shares two main similarities with that of Rose: first, his attachment to philosophical pragmatism and second, his belief in the extra-visual character of “new art.”

A form of pragmatism underpinned Balkind’s curatorial practice and theory. In practice, his elucidation and evaluation of art was based in a Duchampian dialogue about the limits and nature of art. As a critic, Balkind saw his role as illuminating the position of the artist for the viewer. He said, “art is everything and everywhere. Art is not everything and everywhere, but depends upon intention: either the intention as put forth in the production of an object, as the postulation of an idea, or as an eye which selects.”72 Balkind’s intention was to transmit an idea and to create dialogue, both on the part of the artist and the critic, in hopes of bringing about the critique and undoing of one movement (regional landscape painting) and the building of an entirely new one (new dada). Balkind shared this methodology with Rose who believed that a pragmatist critic had greater depth than a formalist, calling for comparative or relativist judgment as opposed to idealist judgment. Relativist judgment was made through the direct and immediate experience of the critic and not on an already-fixed set of evaluative criteria as in Greenbergian formalism. Similarly, Balkind situated experience as the foundation of his critical approach, writing that evaluation comes “out of our own personal vats...instincts, genes, inherited tendencies.” He claimed

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72 Written interview with Charlotte Townsend, January 1972, Balkind Series.
that a critic absorbs information over the course of time and eventually makes value judgments based on experience and personal characteristics, hopefully tempered with “richness of soul and humanity.”  

Balkind’s practice emphasized experience, openness, and subjectivity. He wrote: “a verification process would be, in my terms, something that my experience tells me, yet always retaining the right to change my mind.” He embraced an open critical method where process and deliberation replaced idealism, more specifically, the idealism of the European-based criticism of Greenberg. Balkind’s theoretical praxis, therefore, rejected European models of aesthetic judgment, along with European landscape painting, in favour of American grass-roots philosophy. Rose’s texts provided philosophical and theoretical arguments for pragmatism. Arguing that Greenberg’s aesthetic discourse was primarily neo-Kantian, where judgment and taste were objective qualities, Rose implied that Greenberg’s (and Kant’s) theory unites art and aesthetics, thereby limiting art from being anything other than expressions of beauty, quality, and taste. Formalism retained links to European epistemology and was deemed to be obsolete in the American cold war context. By contrast, philosophical pragmatism grew out of American democratic and republican values and, for critics such as Rose and Balkind, could respond more legitimately to North American cultural formations.

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73 Ibid., n. pag.
74 Ibid., n. pag.
75 In Kant after Duchamp (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1996), Thierry de Duve explains how Kantian philosophy informs Greenberg’s theory. Kantian aesthetics necessarily embody Cartesian duality where judgment is understood as a facility of the mind and intellect that is divorced from bodily experience. The role of the critic is particularly privileged as only a highly sensitive connoisseur could have the taste and ability to identify value and timelessness in art. The act of aesthetic judgment is a universal truth that Kant calls the “supersensible substrate of humanity.” The supersensible is an Idea of Reason that, going beyond ordinary reason, is a rare quality possessed by the critic and therefore imbuing him with universal ability.
76 Rose mounted a case for the pragmatic character of minimal and pop. She argued that Greenberg’s formalism was based in an idealist European tradition whereas pop and minimalism were “uniquely
The second similarity that Balkind shared with Rose was his belief that "new art" or new dada, had its source outside the visual arts, namely in Black Mountain aesthetics. John Cage and Merce Cunningham, in particular, epitomized the potential of visual art to re-contextualize both art and life while philosophically challenging traditional systems of representation. Rose advocated Cage as the source for "anti-formal" art. For example, she argued that happenings and environments were the visual equivalents of Cagean chance and silence. In the same manner, Balkind posited Cage as central to art practices on the west coast, such as to dancer Ann Halprin and the San Francisco Tape Music Centre. Balkind’s engagement with Black Mountain was direct, beginning in 1961 with the visits of Robert Duncan and Robert Creeley, and then continuing with Cage and Cunningham in 1962 and 1966.

Cage was significant not only for his theories on chance, but also for his attachment to Zen that resonated with particular force in Vancouver. The liminality of the Pacific coast and its projection as a utopia held the promise of social and spiritual transformation. In Silence, Cage commented on transformation, particularly as it relates to repetition:

In Zen they say: if something is boring after two minutes, try it for four. If still boring, try it for eight, sixteen, thirty-two, and so on. Eventually, one discovers that it's not boring but very interesting.77

Brian Fisher’s Maya # 5, featured in Beyond Regionalism, consists of narrowly drawn precise hard-edge lines in a repeating pattern that evoked, on one level, pre-Columbian culture. Pacific, also from 1965, with its obvious allusion to the west coast, is painted with a similar symmetrical harmony. Both paintings use illusion created by repeating lines to create a sense of rhythm and movement, one drawing on American.” This polarity marked the end of the European Age and the emergence of the United States as the world power. Harrison, 123-4.

77 John Cage from Silence, quoted by Rose in “ABC Art,” in Art in America (vol. 53, no. 5, Oct/Nov 1965), 65.
ancient culture and the other on natural oceanic rhythms. The process of looking at the repeating symmetry was akin to the process of gaining self-awareness where physical activity (seeing) transforms into internal awareness. Like Cage, Fisher wanted the viewer to concentrate on his paintings for at least half an hour to experience this transformation.\textsuperscript{78}

Gary Lee-Nova included \textit{Magic Mirror} in \textit{Beyond Regionalism}. Like Fisher, Lee-Nova painted in the hard-edge idiom and wanted optical illusion to guide the viewer out of the internal world of meaning towards visual experience. Lee-Nova produced in several media – painting, drawing, sculpture, and film – and in each he was influenced by the activities of the Festival of the Contemporary Arts, especially by Conner, Brakhage, and Cage. In a letter to poet Gerry Gilbert in 1964, Lee-Nova wrote:

\begin{quote}
John Cage has written a book on SILENCE – Silences are multitudinous – the speaking silence of this page when I am writing and you are reading. The silent spaces between things...before the word there is space and silence – after it and before...in spatial silence there are no words or fear or doubt or love or hate...\textsuperscript{79}
\end{quote}

The paintings of Fisher and Lee-Nova were described by Wallace as having “freedom not of the imagination, but of the release of the psyche from memory.”\textsuperscript{80}

While Balkind was in keeping with Rose in terms of his adherence to pragmatist methodology and his positioning of Black Mountain poetics as a main source for new art, his critical practice was specific. First, in contrast to Rose, Balkind did not completely reject formalism, nor did he promote a binary opposition between

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{78} Watson, \textit{Paint}, 19.
\item \textsuperscript{79} Letter from Lee-Nova to Gilbert, 1 May 1964, Lee-Nova Fonds, Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery Archives.
\item \textsuperscript{80} \textit{The Ubyssy} (22 Oct 1965), 10.
\end{itemize}
Greenberg and Cage. Balkind did not embrace Cagean practice for its difference from Greenbergian formalism, but rather because Cagean aesthetics embraced open form poetics that were so central to Vancouver cultural practice. Furthermore, Balkind perceived other strands of influence in Vancouver, such as surrealism and hard-edge painting, as coexisting rather than competing. Second, and most important, Balkind did not consider the new art to be “purely American.” Balkind was building the “pacific nation” that transcended national boundaries and incorporated diverse, even European, sources.

Balkind’s curatorial openness had a counterpart in the teaching and artistic practice of Roy Kiyooka. As discussed in the previous chapters, Kiyooka’s involvement with Olsonian poetics and *blew ointment* provoked his exploration into subjectivity and history. At the same time, his practice in abstract and hard-edge painting, which he eventually abandoned at the end of the 1960s, represented an adherence to formalism. Kiyooka arrived in Vancouver in 1960 from Regina where he was a teacher and participant in the Emma Lake Artists’ Workshop with Barnett Newman in 1959 and again with Greenberg in 1962. By 1964, Kiyooka had become known for his large-scale hard-edge canvases, an idiom that he taught at the Vancouver School of Art between 1960 and 1964 to students such as Lee-Nova,

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81 Rose’s insistence on Cage (and Cunningham) as the source of 1960s anti-formalist art strengthened throughout the decade. By the late 1960s, her critical approach was articulated through an oppositional binary that polarized Greenberg and Cage. Where Greenbergian aesthetics represented European traditions of idealism locked within systems of taste, Cagean practice represented American democratic values, such as freedom. Rose most clearly articulates the Greenberg/Cage binary in “Problems of Criticism, V: The Politics of Art Part II,” *Artforum* (vol. 7, no. 5, Jan 1969), 44-9; and, “Problems of Criticism, VI: The Politics of Art Part III,” *Artforum* (vol. 7, no. 9, May 1969), 46-51.

82 While European romantic painting was being challenged, certain European avant-garde expressions were of interest to Vancouver artists, specifically the London pop scene. For Balkind, the French *nouveau roman* of Alain Robbe-Grillet was also a valuable model of non-narrative literary practices. In the exhibition essay for *Art Becomes Reality* in 1964, he referred to the *nouveau roman* as a provocative avant-garde model. For the theory of the *nouveau roman*, see Roch C. Smith, *Understanding Alain Robbe-Grillet*, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2000 and Raylene Ramsay, *Robbe-Grillet and Modernity: Science, Sexuality and Subversion*, Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1992.
Michael Morris, Bodo Pfeifer, Fisher, Glenn Lewis, and Breeze. His hard-edge aesthetics were derived from New York post-painterly abstraction but his students, particularly Lee-Nova and Morris, modified it with London hard-edge and pop.

Both had trained in England, Lee-Nova at the Coventry School and Art (1961-2) and Morris at the Slade School of Art in London (1965-66).

Over the course of the late 1960s an early 1970s, Kiyooka's focus shifted to poetry, sculpture, and photography but his influence as a teacher did not diminish – to his students, he embodied the cross-over between places, cultures, and media. His first book of poetry Kyoto Airs (1964) and his hard-edge and elliptical paintings were representative of the openness and exploratory nature of his teaching and practice.

Just as significant as his work at Emma Lake was Kiyooka's participation in open form poetics in Vancouver, years he referred to as extraordinary:

Ask anyone who heard Bob Creeley read poetry. Or listened to John Cage while Merce Cunningham danced. Or participated in one of Ann Halprin's dance/happenings. Or went to the Cellar to listen to Al Neil...Poetry was very much in the air...The west coast landscape school had lost its hold on a new generation who were looking for a relevant aesthetic and I, unwittingly, became their collaborator. I brought the hype of the contemporary with me and shoved it in under the trees with everything else.

But before that, Kiyooka brought internationalism to young Vancouver artists, training them in formalist painting and hard-edge techniques. In his preoccupation with harmony and balance, he also encouraged exploration into the metaphysical and

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85 London hard-edge and pop were significant to Vancouver art production and were brought directly to the city by Lee-Nova and Morris. Their British training was supported by Canada Council grants pointing to both the acceptance of London as a significant art centre but also illustrating Canada's enduring cultural association with Britain. For a discussion of the London scene in the 1960s, see Art & the 60s: This Was Tomorrow, eds. Chris Stephens and Katharine Stout, London: Tate Britain, 2004.

86 Kiyooka in Roy Kiyooka: 25 Years (Vancouver: VAG, 1975), n. pag.
spiritual dimensions of these attributes. Kiyooka’s role as an artist, poet, and teacher is central in the formation of a Vancouver avant-garde.

1966: The Festival of the Contemporary Arts and the west coast avant-garde

Beyond Regionalism signaled Vancouver’s artistic break from tradition. Young local artists started to engage with international movements and with the social and political factors that shaped their lives. Tallman and Balkind began to build new artistic paradigms while Vancouver cultural producers selected specific sources with which to re-construct their aesthetics. What guided their choice of aesthetic and artistic models? The 1966 Festival of the Contemporary Arts, February 2-11, brought together the three most significant sources for the formation of the Vancouver avant-garde: John Cage, the poets and artists of the San Francisco Renaissance, and Los Angeles pop art. Each of these artistic practices resonated with Balkind’s affinity with both pragmatism and open form poetics. Balkind did not have to look further than the west coast milieu. With his personal and professional connections, the sources were physically and culturally accessible and easily adapted to Vancouver. Even Cage, who was not a west coast artist, had become central to many practices in California that incorporated Black Mountain aesthetics, such as the San Francisco Tape Music Centre. The Festival was also significant because for the first time it highlighted a Vancouver artist, Iain Baxter. Emerging local artists were

87 For a discussion of Kiyooka’s central role in the production of early Vancouver Art, see Watson, Paint, 18.
88 As I have mentioned in previous chapters, Vancouver’s modernist movement of the 1950s also had an international dimension, most notably due to the influence of B.C. Binning. See Chapter Two for his role as director of the Festival of the Contemporary Arts which featured international avant-garde artists.
89 The Festival was organized by B.C. Binning, Murray Farr, and Alvin Balkind and attendance was approximately seven thousand people. Other performances included: music for piano and viola by Barbara Pentland; films by Storm de Hirsch, Marie Meken, Jonas Kekas, and Kenneth Anger; “Evolution of the Blues” musical program; premiere of the play “Friedhof” by David Watmough; “non-verbal” poetry; Les Puces Jazz Trio; live music with tapes by the Department of Music; electronic music by Vladimir Ussachevsky. Festival pamphlet, Balkind Series.
active participants in the Festival in various ways, including Ian Wallace who reviewed the Festival and Dennis Wheeler who interviewed Robert Duncan. Jeff Wall also contributed an illustration promoting the Festival to *The Ubyssey*. “Blammo! Kapow! Zowie! and Zap!” announced the Festival’s events and a collage of photographs and drawings showed an environment by Baxter, dance by Cunningham, films by Perry and Brakhage, and a play by Robert Duncan.

It is not surprising that Balkind repeatedly invited Cage to the Festivals. As discussed in the previous chapter, Cage’s aesthetics were founded in a search for freedom from entrenched ways of seeing and thinking. Epitomizing pragmatic utopianism, his work consistently destroyed and created aesthetic boundaries. In his approach to art writing and curating, Balkind also sought to break-down totalizing systems. In this sense, both embraced pragmatism – for Balkind, it offered an open methodology of curating and evaluation, and for Cage, it was the philosophical basis of his work. Taking his pragmatism from John Dewey and using ideas of cultural critique and renewal, Cage positioned experience as the point of departure for contemplation and analysis.

On an artistic level, Balkind understood that Cage’s principles of chance and indeterminacy in music could be adapted to other media such as film, happenings, and environments where process and perception became the most crucial aspects of the work. Cage wanted to merge art and life but more specifically, he created

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interplay between diverse practices, namely pragmatism, Zen, and dada. The intersection of the disjunctive elements of *bricolage*, open process, and randomness created what he called “anarchic harmony.” In Vancouver, where young students and emerging artists were dismantling old systems and seeking political, social, and intellectual engagement, Cage’s aesthetics provided a provocative model.

At the 1966 Festival, Cage presented two musical works that were accompanied by Cunningham and his dancers – *Suite for Five* and *How to Pass, Kick, Fall, and Run*. The latter piece was composed with random hammering, knocking, and scraping. Each minute, Cage randomly selected a passage from his text *Indeterminacy* to read aloud while musician David Tudor controlled audio equipment to record, distort, and fragment the excerpts and then re-play them to the audience through speakers. The dancers were not dictated to by the musical score but co-existed with it and moved spontaneously for the duration of the piece. Praising its freedom of movement and expression, a reviewer for *The Ubyssey* wrote: “our attitudes and reactions to Cage are, like his music, indeterminate. But there is one constant in his work – the reactionary experience of the listener makes them art.” Wallace whole-heartedly embraced Cage, writing that Cunningham and Cage’s interplay between independent forces are at the “juncture of every single experience and in everything we do.”

The poetry and art of the San Francisco Renaissance was the strongest catalyst for the formation of the avant-garde in Vancouver in the 1960s, starting with Robert Duncan’s visit in 1961 that prompted the creation of *Tish*. The San Francisco Tapestry Project...

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92 From Zen, Cage adapted the notion of process, penetration, unimpededness, and egolessness. His teacher was Daisetz Suzuki at Colombia University. As already discussed, Zen and “eastern” spirituality were particularly prevalent in Vancouver and on the west coast.
93 Raussert, 177.
94 *The Ubyssey* (11 Feb 1966), 7.
95 Ibid., 7.
Music Centre, Robert Creeley, Lew Welch, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Gerd Stern, Ann Halprin, Bruce Conner, Stan Brakhage, Blaser, and Spicer each contributed to the Festivals and to the artistic formation of Vancouver. The bohemian culture of San Francisco that included beat poetry and film, assemblage, collage, and open form poetry permeated Vancouver. In 1965, the Sound Gallery opened. Poets, visual artists, musicians, and dancers exchanged their work and ideas. In June 1966, Tish promoted the Sound Gallery:

The Sound Gallery has moved and a new media has been added: the dance...we arrived last Saturday night and were overwhelmed by the Al Neil trio...Tapes, moving mirrors, projectors, strobe, dancers, and often all at once...The attendance has doubled every week and the police have been told that people are happy here, happier than those in the licensed shit across the street.\footnote{Tish 36 (18 June 1966), n. pag. The Sound Gallery was established in 1965 by Gregg Simpson, Sam Perry, and Al Neil who were also responsible for organizing the Trips Festival in July 1966 that included the Grateful Dead and Jefferson Airplane.}

A crucial contribution from San Francisco to Vancouver (and beyond) was the publications of City Lights Books. Texts such as Astronauts of Inner Space, Spicer's Language, and recent works by Creeley and Duncan had a straight trajectory to Vancouver via Tallman and Tish. City Lights printed both Californian and international avant-garde literature and poetry and disseminated texts that shared aesthetic and political aspirations. For example, in March 1966, City Lights released an anthology of French radical playwright, poet, and avant-garde prophet Antonin Artaud. In a book review, Wallace wrote that Artaud's theories on the "theatre of cruelty" from the 1930s had become relevant to the "neo-barbarian, hung-up generation of 1966."\footnote{The Ubyssey, 11 March 1966, 6.} Artaud's bitter and confessional writing mourned the death of the spirit under the cruelty of life. For him, literature was complicit in the death of the spirit. He rejected literary tradition, writing instead in irrational and absurdist...
language. Artaud, for Wallace, represented a viable European avant-garde model of radicalism. On the Anglo-Saxon reaction to Artaud, Wallace wrote: “His emotional effusiveness and catholic spirit run counter to WASP emotional self-consciousness.”

City Lights Books nourished and energized the west coast avant-garde and Vancouver was a major site of reception for its disseminations.

The San Francisco Tape Music Centre had been a regular feature at the Festivals and performed for the third time in 1966. Like Cage and Cunningham’s conversion of sound and movement in random order, the Tape Music Centre projected electronic sound and light images in the auditorium. Enveloped by the spectacle, the viewers experienced it as a kinetic display of juxtaposing elements. Wallace wrote that the happening was a “chance fluctuation between harmony and dissociation, where sight meets sound as an independent force.” Wallace observed that the interplay of independent forces is an inevitable function of living and that electronically reproduced simulations only extended possibilities of human expression. Invoking Artaud’s theatre of cruelty, Wallace argued that Cage, Baxter’s plastics, and the Tape Music Centre each provided an alternative language using gestures, light, electronics, and sound.

Robert Duncan was a regular contributor to the Festival. In 1966, he held readings of his poetry and his allegorical and theosophical play Adam’s Way. Duncan’s poetics, politics, and philosophical orientation continued to impact young Vancouver poets and artists. For example, in an interview with Wayne Nyberg and Dennis Wheeler in January 1966, Duncan espoused Whitehead’s process philosophy, particularly Whitehead’s belief that the universe is always in a state of creating itself.

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98 Ibid., 6.
99 The Ubyssey, 11 Feb 1966, 7.
100 See “A Dance with Orpheus” for a brief description of Adam’s Way, Collapse 2, 23-4.
Duncan said: “our aliveness at this moment is our only experience of God. The poem is one of the means of being intensely alive.”101 The culture of the Festival embodied the philosophical notions of Duncan and Whitehead, not only in selecting work by Cage and the Tape Music Centre but also in the Festival slogans, “There is no tomorrow,” and “The world ends last week.”102

*Adam’s Way*, although an allegorical and surreal piece commenting on Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, was also a testimonial on the Vietnam War. Duncan published a statement on the play in *The Ubyssey*, writing that his drama was ultimately about freedom through personal self-fulfillment and service to humanity. Using Dante, gnostic gospels, and the book of Genesis, Duncan’s play included good, evil, Satan, creativity, and destruction. In his statement, he wrote that communism is a spiritual idea of brotherhood and that capitalism is an “exaggeration of human greed and selfishness...a doctrine of Satanic perversion.” Despite his stated desire to keep his theatre removed from party politics, Duncan’s play did focus on the poetic and spiritual dimensions of the contemporary moment: “I see the war in Vietnam as a profound evil, an evil at the level that has poetic potentialities.”103 Duncan’s approach was echoed in Vancouver art practice where work did not usually openly engage directly with the political. Instead, the social and political context inspired artists to search for alternative modes of perceiving and expression in order to find freedom from them.

Duncan also had an interest in contemporary visual art, including pop art. At the 1966 Festival, Duncan officially opened Iain Baxter’s environment *Bagged Place*. Created in collaboration with Tom Burrows, Ian Wallace, Murray Farr, Dallas

Selman, and Gerry Walker, *Bagged Place* simulated a one-bedroom apartment, complete with furniture, utensils, appliances, and food, and was covered entirely in plastic. Like Cage and the Tape Music Centre, Baxter’s apartment provoked viewers into considering and analyzing their environment. Wallace praised the environment:

> Absolute realism! Except for one fact. Everything is bagged. Bagged coffee, bagged rug, bagged water in bagged sink, bagged room... Is it a satire on pop art, which chooses to glorify the common and inane? Is it a satire of our sterilized plasticized super-valu society where everything comes packaged and bottled?  

Baxter’s ironic use of plastic indicates a closer tie to Los Angeles than to San Francisco open form poetics. Baxter has often been pigeon-holed as a conceptual artist and certainly his work from the late sixties and early seventies reveals a dedication to the critique of consumer culture. With his wife Ingrid, Baxter established the N.E. Thing Co., a title that replaced Baxter as “auteur” and focused on site-specific and photographic production. However, I am asserting that in the mid-sixties, Baxter should be understood as primarily a pop artist. Balkind placed him within the pop aesthetic, specifically within Los Angeles pop. On a trip to Los Angeles in early 1965, Balkind met gallery owner Rolf Nelson. Upon Balkind’s return to Vancouver, he wrote to Nelson about Baxter:

> He has an exciting potential, and might very well prove of considerable interest to a good dealer in Los Angeles... He is a gentle young man, and one with an authentic pop orientation, as well as one with considerably more imagination (in materials, at least) than any other artist up in these parts.

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106 Letter from Balkind to Nelson, 4 Dec 1965, Balkind Series.
Baxter, among other Vancouver artists such as Dallas Selman, Duane Lunden, and Lee-Nova, used synthetic materials, especially plastic, in his rejection of traditional landscape painting. Instead, they engaged with the materials and products of industry and the everyday. While San Francisco provided a model of multidisciplinary bohemia and collaborative galleries, Los Angeles provided approaches to art that included new materials and a raw, cool manner that appealed to artists who wanted to counter histories of expressionist and lyrical painting.

By mid-century, Los Angeles had become the city *par excellence* of image-production. Growing by five hundred people per day, its freeways and suburbs expanded at an unprecedented rate. The history of Los Angeles’ urban development, as Edward Soja has noted, engenders a polarization between a social utopia and dystopia where cycles of boom and expansion were punctuated by extreme social upheaval.\(^{107}\) By the 1950s, Los Angeles had become an economic and cultural rival to New York as a leader in the film industry, and petroleum, automobile and aircraft industries. Growing to ten million people in between 1940 and 1970, it also became a crucial link in the American “military industrial complex” with its aerospace industry that supported World War II and the Korean and Vietnam wars. In the 1960s, Los Angeles had endured the McCarthy era in Hollywood but had also ghettoized racial groups into barrios and inner city neighbourhoods. In 1965, in the black neighbourhood of Watts (where Simon Rodia had erected his towers as a testament to

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\(^{107}\) In *The City: Los Angeles and Urban Theory at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996) Allen Scott and Edward Soja explain the utopia/dystopia model of Los Angeles history, including the booms of the 1910s, 1920-40s, and 1950s when petroleum, production and refinement, Hollywood and the aircraft industries positioned Los Angeles as a serious economic force in the United States. The editors also outline the social unrest that characterized this rapid growth, including strong anti-Asian sentiments, the ghettoization of Chinese, Mexican, and European labourers, and the internment of thirty thousand Japanese-Americans in 1942. Introduction, 3-9.
the Californian culture of debris) the most violent race riots in the United States to date erupted, revealing the dark side of the California “dreamscape.”

The assemblage aesthetic of the Watts towers was shared by artists throughout California. However, in Los Angeles, in addition to beat and junk practices, a specific style began to emerge known as the “L.A. Look.” Larry Bell, Craig Kauffman, Ed Ruscha, Billy Al Bengston, and Robert Irwin exemplified the “L.A. Look” that Peter Plagens has described as “the aroma of Los Angeles – newness [and] postcard sunset colour.” As epitomized in Kauffman’s *Untitled* (1967), plastic was Los Angeles’ canonical material for its permanence and high polish that rivaled the traditional bronze or marble. Los Angeles hard-edge painting was re-incarnated in plastics where lines and geometric forms transformed into reflective objects. In Vancouver, the “L.A. Look” resonated strongly, particularly with artists such as Baxter, but also with Lee-Nova and Michael Morris who recognized the potential to take their hard-edge idiom into new directions.

The development of the Los Angeles art scene played out in the pages of *Artforum*. Vancouver artists followed it closely as they recognized affinities with many aspects of Los Angeles art practice. First, Los Angeles artists were employing the formalist idiom of hard-edge in innovative ways. For example, at the Ferus Gallery, Robert Irwin and Larry Bell used straight lines and hard-edge forms in painting and sculpture to explore illusion and perception. Second, Los Angeles artists were also active in the cross-pollination of art and poetics, specifically in “little

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109 Plagens, 120.

mag” format. Wallace Berman bridged photographs, drawings, collage, and poetry in his journal *Semina*. Edward Kienholz and George Herms contributed to *Semina*, re-iterating the collage aesthetic both in poetry and visual art. In Vancouver, *blow ointment* paralleled *Semina* with contributions from Al Neil, Selman, Wallace, and Lee-Nova. Third, the “L.A. Look” used local industrial materials to create a specific style that fused graphics, sleek materials, and visual iconography. For example, Edward Ruscha’s word paintings and reductive colour, such as *Large Trademark with Eight Spotlights* (1962), operated in the space between pop and graphic art. In Vancouver, artists such as Michael Morris also put language into question within the paradigm of “modernist visibility.” Last, the Ferus Gallery and the Rolf Nelson Gallery in L.A. exhibited diverse art practices including hard-edge, assemblage, beat, and pop, a type of openness that was mirrored in Vancouver, especially by Balkind. In 1966, Baxter exhibited at the Rolf Nelson Gallery marking his entrance into the Los Angeles pop scene.

1967: *Joy and Celebration*

In 1967, the year of the Canadian centennial when national unification was at the forefront of national political discussions, Robin Blaser wrote his journal *The*
Pacific Nation from Simon Fraser University. Embracing an international community of poetry that transcended national borders and cultural boundaries, he stated:

I wish to put together an imaginary nation. It is my belief that no other nation is possible, or rather, I believe that authors who count take responsibility for a map which is addressed to travellers of the earth, the world, and the spirit. Images of our cities must join our poetry.\(^{114}\)

Blaser’s idea of the “pacific nation” embodied utopian notions of artistic, spiritual, and political freedom. In his exhibition Joy and Celebration, Balkind echoed Blaser’s belief in a new Pacific region that was international in spirit and free from tradition.

Joy and Celebration featured forty-six works by thirty-two local artists and demonstrated the diversity of Vancouver practices as well as the adaptation of aesthetic and philosophical sources.\(^{115}\) Including sculpture, painting, prints, and mixed media, the exhibition displayed “love of materials, delight in colour and form [and] an absence of rhetoric....”\(^{116}\) A “remote, lotus-eating city,” Balkind named Vancouver’s sense of freedom as a factor in the range and diversity of works presented. He referred to the “umbilical cords” and “precious body fluids” linking Vancouver with Los Angeles and San Francisco. Balkind again used Rose to frame the parameters of the exhibition. However, instead of re-iterating the “purely American” orientation of “new art” in his triangulation of Vancouver, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, he asserted the transnational identity of the west coast.

Joy and Celebration has been glossed over in Vancouver art history, largely because of its pre-1969 date. In his article “Discovering the de-featured Landscape,”


Watson refers to the exhibition as representing the “bouncy” spirit against which artists such as Jeff Wall, Ian Wallace, and Duane Lunden began to practice within the paradigm of the “defeatured landscape.”

On the other hand, I consider the exhibition as a milestone in the development of the Vancouver avant-garde. Not only did it include the early works of Wallace and Lunden as part of the art scene rather than outside of it, but the exhibition also represented a first international appearance for Vancouver artists. *Joy and Celebration* traveled throughout the western and southern United States, demonstrating the specificity not only of the west coast avant-garde, but particularly that of Vancouver.

Balkind asserted that the most important aspect of the new sensibility on display in *Joy and Celebration* was a concern for conceptual, reductive illusion. Quoting Rose, Balkind suggested that the works displayed “a multiplicity of self-contradictory spatial illusions...minimized artiness, pretense, mannered self-consciousness, phony posturing and pseudo-philosophizing.”

Balkind asserted that it was through a detached use of colour, shapes, and illusion that Vancouver artists questioned the very nature of art. He also identified another influence on this group of artists – that of Duchamp: “Marcel Duchamp’s smile hovers over much of it, like some ironic ghost, alternately compelling and mocking.”

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117 Watson ultimately dismisses the exhibition, writing that it displayed “a pitiful sensuality in which bright colours, new plastics and shiny surfaces had been abstracted from the explosion of consumer commodities, but especially cars. The essence of new nothingness mingled with the last stand of patriarchal notions of male-active, female-passive sexuality in works that are now mostly forgotten, lost or destroyed.” “Defeatured Landscape,” 248-9.

118 The east/west opposition was a particularly divisive issue and was played out in *Artforum*, critically and physically. The marginalization of art in San Francisco, Los Angeles (and Vancouver) was re-affirmed by the move of *Artforum* to New York in 1967.

119 Rose quoted by Balkind, *Joy and Celebration*, n. pag. Balkind also went on to identify the specificity of Vancouver production: “a lack of personal aggressiveness suggests the use of psychedelic drugs, or perhaps it is merely a determination to avoid the cruelties of the past; or it may, in part, reflect the cool, neutral, unemotional air of this city, which neither proposes nor disposes of what these younger artists produce.”

120 Ibid., n. pag. Duchamp was not a distant figure on the west coast. His major retrospective exhibition was organized by Walter Hopps at the Pasadena Art Museum, 8 Oct-3 Nov 1963, where many
Balkind wanted to exhibit how Vancouver artists, employing avant-garde vocabularies and practices, including poetics, were challenging traditional painting and sculpture in order to re-define the conception and function of art.  

Reductive illusionism characterized the work of Lunden and Wallace, two artists who had rarely been exhibited before 1967. Lunden was preoccupied with geometric shapes, primarily the triangle, in both formal and metaphorical terms. Wallace, intensely active in the art scene as a writer, was also a painter. Both artists used minimal forms to explore the formal and physical limits of painting and treated paintings as objects to be experienced in space. The act of seeing was conceived of as function of perception where both the object and the environment were separate but interacting entities. At the same time, both were exploring language, specifically open form poetics where language became about the mechanics of sound rather than its semantic or symbolic function. For Lunden and Wallace, visual art was de-materializing but poetry was materializing.

In *Joy and Celebration*, Lunden sprayed a triangle onto the corner of a wall using enamel paint. *Corner Painting* exemplified Lunden’s fixation with triangles, a geometric form that he used to explore the experience of space in an environment.

Measuring almost eight by ten feet, the work consisted of seven horizontal stripes and
one larger monolithic top section. Without canvas or a frame, each separate part synthesized to make a whole form. A monumental painting, the triangle was at once fragmented and whole, both encompassed within and removed from the environment. Similar to Merce Cunningham and John Cage who used movement and sound to explore the disjunctures and connectedness between bodies and space, Lunden used paint and, most often, the inverted triangle to represent opening and recession. The viewer experiences the undulation between the vortex that opens up and the apex that regresses to a single point. He was interested in the points of recession or regression where an idea, experience, or sound narrows and diminishes.¹²² Lunden’s philosophical and poetic approach to the triangle contrasted with the function of geometry in traditional painting where a triangle was used for perspective and depth in landscape painting. Like Baxter who made plastic landscapes (and was also included in Joy and Celebration), Lunden’s “landscape” took away painterly artifice and left only the landscape of the wall, enamel paint, and gallery space.¹²³

Wallace’s painting Neon Red, also reductive in form, used acrylic and day-glo to address the formal aspects of painting such as the shape of the canvas and the application of materials onto the surface. However, Wallace did not put forth his canvas as a traditional painting but rather as an object that has both an internal structure as well as a relationship to the space around it. Analyzing Wallace’s paintings that were installed at the Simon Fraser University Gallery in 1968, Marguerite Pinney noted:

> Essentially they remain objects in space. Not integration with but relationship to the environment is Wallace’s concern. Primarily, he stresses the relationship of the arbitrarily painted frame around the unframed edge to its surroundings and to its contained inner universe.

¹²² Interview with Duane Lunden, July 2003.
¹²³ Also like Baxter, Lunden used plastics and high finish and looked to Los Angeles artists such as Robert Irwin and Larry Bell for both form and materials.
The context of art was Wallace’s main concern; a continuation of his aesthetic questions from 1966 when he critically embraced the San Francisco Tape Music Center’s interplay between sound and movement. Wallace also explored sound and vision in his visual poetry that was featured in *blew ointment*.

Several visual artists contributed to local little magazines including Gary Lee-Nova, Sam Perry, Al Neil, and Dallas Selman. Wallace was included in the June 1967 issue of *blew ointment* with a textual collage. In a crossword-like pattern with random words and letters juxtaposed, Wallace’s collage was similar to Cage’s mesostics. Like waterfalls or ideograms, mesostics negotiate the verbal and the visual. Their form on the page is determined by a central axis from which radiates random letters. In Cage’s *Merce Cunningham*, for example, the word “merce” is not spelled out but rather is part of a collection of letters that were determined by chance, specifically by the *I Ching*. In this way, both English and Chinese language systems occupy the same physical and semantic space and therefore fulfill Cage’s aesthetic goal of juxtaposing diverse elements. Wallace’s collage uses whole words from popular print culture to put into play sexuality and language. “Liquid, meat, peach,” transform...

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125 *blew ointment*, vol. 5, no. 2, June 1967. Also included in this issue are five collages by Lee-Nova depicting geometric forms and celestial maps.
126 Mesostics are part of Cage’s broader inquiry into Zen and Asian pacific “ideologies.” As discussed in Chapter Two, his preoccupation with Asian philosophies made Cage particularly adaptable to the west coast that had an imagined affinity with Asia. Furthermore, Cage’s mesostics had a political dimension where he was trying to dislodge the artificial binary between east and west, specifically the ideological battle between communism and capitalism. Raussert writes: “His [Cage’s] artistic experiments attempted to correct what the ideological and military confrontation between the East and the West – the Korean war, the Vietnam war – failed to do: namely to establish a basis for mutual recognition and acceptance.”
186.
127 The west coast’s Pacific location allowed for an imagined connection with Asian philosophy. Classical Chinese philosophy and American pragmatism are intellectually related. For example, both are concerned with a type of humanism where experience, thought and action guide intention. See Kuang-ming Wu, “The Spirit of Pragmatism and the Pragmatic Spirit” in *The Recovery of Philosophy in America*, 59-91.
from linguistic signifiers into a waterfall of erotic imagery where “meaty, juicy, and sweet” juxtopose, verbally and visually, to create a climactic frenzy on the page. Working in what Kiyooka called the “interface,” Wallace built his collage in the space between the verbal and the visual.

Michael Morris, included in Joy & Celebration with two hard-edge canvases entitled Painting and Painting For Ernst Jandl, was also concerned with the “objectness” of painting and language in a Cagean sense. Painting for Ernst Jandl was a variation of his successful painting The Problem of Nothing shown the previous year at Painting 66 at the Vancouver Art Gallery. The Problem of Nothing has been canonized in Vancouver art history, not only as a symbol of the increasing redundancy of modernist painting, but also as a marker of a new aesthetics – that of nothingness and silence. The image, in saturated colour of imprecise hard-edge lines, contains four shapes that advance and recess, creating dynamic illusion. A grey pyramid rises in the foreground atop a powerfully horizontal blue band at the bottom. Against a background of vertical pink and red stripes, a thought bubble advances on the surface and, instead of a textual declaration, contains opposing horizontal stripes in a clashing palette – purple, yellow, black, and grey. Op-art, pop and colour-field intervene on the canvas, resulting in the inability to utter a statement on the future of painting. The painting, with its concrete shapes and colour forms, undeniably puts forth its own objectness yet its muteness subverts any obvious meaning that may be attached to it.

Painting for Ernst Jandl was named for the twentieth century Austrian poet who abstracted words into their phonetic components. First influenced by dada, Jandl

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later became integral to the dissemination of American new poetry and Black Mountain poetics with his translations of Gertrude Stein, Robert Creeley, and John Cage.\textsuperscript{129} Morris' dedication of the painting to Jandl re-contextualizes The Problem of Nothing as a problem of language. Painting for Ernest Jandl doubles the singular column from the Problem of Nothing, thus making vision and language two halves of a whole function. With two thought bubbles emanating from two pyramidal forms, it is a representation of a mute conversation. Letters of the alphabet are displaced from the central thought bubbles into their own separate and isolated circles at the bottom of the canvas. In this way, they are stripped of their linguistic function and instead become characters, symbols, and aesthetic shapes that are divorced from language, speech, and thought. Painting for Jandl engages with Cage's aesthetics of silence and, despite the rigour and control of the hard-edge idiom, language is freed from its semantic restraints.\textsuperscript{130}

Audrey Capel Doray also worked with sound and visuality. Rather than using minimal forms, however, she integrated popular iconography into her work. She was represented in Joy and Celebration by Hexagon, a six-foot tall paneled light box that taped the sounds of the gallery and played them back through speakers. Six panels of plexiglass with polarized film were attached by wire to a motor that projected comic-like images of pop culture—a blond bombshell, prisoner of war, political campaigning in the media spotlight, group meditation, and a scenic image of a man feeding a bird. On a loop, the “sculpture” used timed light to illuminate the images as

\textsuperscript{129} Stephen Scobie made reference to Jandl in an essay on concrete poet Ian Hamilton Finlay who became a central figure to Vancouver concrete poets. “Concrete Poetry,” The Ubyssey, 9 Feb 1969, 2.

\textsuperscript{130} Ludwig Wittgenstein's language-based epistemology was also central to philosophical explorations into the logic of language and his work has often been considered in relation to pragmatist understandings of language such as those put forth by William James. While it is certain that Vancouver poets were absorbing Black Mountain poetics via Olson and Cage, it is not evident that they were reading Wittgenstein directly. See R.B. Goodman, “Wittgenstein and Pragmatism,” in Parallax (vol. 4, no. 4, Oct 1998), 91-105.
taped sound added a third sensory element to provoke the viewers' awareness. In *Rebirth of Venus*, Capel Doray incorporated open form poetics by including recorded poetry of Judith Copithorne.\(^{131}\) Copithorne studied with Charles Olson during the summer of 1963, was a participant in the Vancouver Lectures with Jack Spicer, and a prolific poet in *Tish* and *blew ointment*. Capel Doray, like Morris, used poetic practices to deconstruct the visual, and with Copithorne's poetry in conjunction with her iconic female figures, she de-stabilized stereotypes of femininity.\(^{132}\)

Capel Doray was also a founding member of the artist collective Intermedia that was established in 1967.\(^{133}\) An umbrella organization that included sculpture, sound, music, performance, poetry, and film, Intermedia developed from the multidisciplinarity of the Festival of the Contemporary Arts as well as the verbal/visual practices at *blew ointment* and the Sound Gallery.\(^{134}\) Established with the financial support of the Canada Council, a grant given no doubt as a result of the city's artistic activity in the previous five years, Intermedia provided support and venue to a diverse and loose group of artists, including Glen Toppings, Lee-Nova, Kiyooka, Morris, Selman, Helen Goodwin, Perry, David Rimmer, Al Razutis, Doray, bissett, Gerry Gilbert, Al Neil, and Gregg Simpson.\(^{135}\) Differentiating between

\(^{131}\) Interview with Capel Doray, 25 January 2004. Copithorne's poetry was also included in Capel Doray's *Origin* (1967).


\(^{134}\) Intermedia nights at the Vancouver Art Gallery were an example of the interface between performance, sound, and visual art. Victor Doray has compiled several essays outlining the history and activities of Intermedia. He stresses the technical aspects, saying that artists were using more technological and industrial materials and need space and expertise. Doray stresses the "cooperatively shared approach to obtaining and using equipment and space." Doray, written account, personal archives of Victor Doray, Nov 1997.

\(^{135}\) David Wilcox of the Canada Council visited Vancouver in 1966 and the Canada Council followed with an unprecedented grant of $40,000 to aid in the formation of Intermedia. For a complete history,
“product” and “process,” Intermedia artists were interested in the symbiosis of the two, such as when dancers, poets, and musicians were intrinsic to sculpture and film.\(^{136}\)

Intermedia was just one manifestation of the duality that had existed in art practice in Vancouver since the early 1960s. Poet Gerry Gilbert defined the terms of the duality in the words of Charles Olson, writing that the duality encompassed both the “poem as a thing lying in itself” and the “poem as a chant.” Gilbert asserted that this duality was also clear in the visual arts.\(^{137}\) Lunden, Wallace, and Morris, for example, wanted to emphasize the objectness of paintings. At the same time, they delved into the dynamic relationship between the object and its environment and system of signification (language).

**1968: The West Coast Now**

*Joy and Celebration* represented the diversity, cohesiveness, and interconnectivity of artistic practices that the Vancouver art scene had achieved by 1967. The specificity of Vancouver avant-garde art was found in the cross-fertilization of art and poetics. Although this was an international avant-garde phenomenon – for example, in New York “anti-formal” art also embraced Cunningham and Cage as aesthetic models – in Vancouver, its adaptation was for a different purpose. Adapted to a Canadian context, American avant-gardism had the potential to de-stabilize European traditions of art that had been dominant in

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\(^{136}\) South of the border, Experiments in Art and Technology (EAT) was exploring a similar union of art and technology, and the Los Angeles branch was a particularly appropriate site for the meeting of pop artists and technology. Companies in Los Angeles were enlisted to participate in art and technology programs as part of EAT. Rauschenberg worked at Teledyne, Lichtenstein at Universal Studios, Robert Irwin at Life Sciences, Larry Bell at Rand, Ron Kitaj at Lockheed, and Warhol at Coules Communications. Barbara Rose Papers, Getty Research Centre.

\(^{137}\) Letter from Gerry Gilbert to Lee-Nova, 3 Dec 1966, Lee-Nova Fonds, Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery Archives.
Vancouver. With Vancouver as an avant-garde nodal point on the west coast, the Pacific region was able to break down national(ist) borders and distinctions, thus creating a transnational region that was both culturally and socially alternative.

The west coast was recognized as a distinct transnational cultural region in the 1968 exhibition *The West Coast Now*. Circulated by the Portland Art Museum, the exhibition included recent work from British Columbia, Washington, Oregon, and California. The exhibition claimed a specific west coast milieu, epitomized in curator Rachel Griffin’s words:

> It might be argued that there is a specific “seacoast” way of thinking... a commonly-held sense of being a region is exactly what makes a region. The entire west coast is emerging as vital for the future of America and Canada.\(^{138}\)

Balkind and Doris Shadbolt, art historian and curator at the Vancouver Art Gallery, were asked to select artists for the British Columbia portion of the exhibition and included Iain Baxter, Claude Breeze, Michael Morris, and Bodo Pfeifer. Baxter’s *Clear Tube*, Breeze’s *Home Viewer #5: Riot Victim*, Morris’ *Atlantis*, and Pfeifer’s *Untitled* represented the range of art practices and discourses in Vancouver. Baxter’s eighteen-foot vinyl inflatable tube and Breeze’s acrylic and fiberglass figure both used industrial materials and forms of the readymade. Morris and Pfeifer painted in the hard-edge idiom. Morris used steel, lacquer and acrylic, and repeating lines to evoke the other-worldliness of Atlantis. Pfeifer fused hard-edge and pop to create an image of the common object. As new dada forms, these works transcended national designations, Balkind argued, and formed part of the dialogue of the west coast avant-garde.

Balkind, Spicer, Blaser, and Tallman were active in creating the “west coast.” In a process similar to pragmatic utopianism, they brought together diverse artistic media and aesthetic practices within an imaginary, timeless space. Poets, filmmakers, dancers, and visual artists from Canada and the United States converged at the university and in the city and their interface characterized the “pacific nation.” Balkind in particular created a philosophical foundation for Vancouver. Pragmatism and open form poetics (process philosophy) guided his theory and practice. Open form poetics that was based in Duncan, Olson, and Whitehead represented a tangible and adaptable model of American radical modernism. Meanwhile, pragmatism offered a progressive and open approach to art criticism.

However, the fusion of the two philosophies occasionally engendered tensions. For example, Tish poets, in their challenge to traditional poetry, were against romanticism in language and verse. However, they held a deeply romantic view of “nature” and believed in the possibility of transcending oneself and one’s history through “universal music.” In the visual arts, a similar tension occurred. New artists were cool, detached, and impersonal, yet at the same time they believed in art’s transformative possibilities. Balkind referred to this as a new kind of romanticism, writing that “like God, [it] is not quite as dead as has been suggested.” Balkind described the new romanticism:

[It is] one less theatrical, less blatantly emotional, more detached; yet one brimming over with the joy of new discoveries, the excitement of the as yet unknown,

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139 Wegner discusses the role of de- and re-territorialization in utopian formations where older formations are dissolved and new cultural flows are created, 25. Branden Joseph also acknowledged de-territorialization as a process integral to post-war avant-garde formations and noted that John Cage was a source for Deleuze and Guattari’s theory of de-territorialization: “lacking any stable, localizable, autonomous, or subjective outside, Cage would set himself the task of articulating an understanding of difference, or what he still termed the 'outside,' as an imminent force within the totalized sphere itself.” Joseph, Random Order: Robert Rauschenberg and the neo-avant-garde (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2003), 20.
and the huge challenge of new forms, new colour possibilities, new concepts.raft

New romanticism, as Balkind called it, was an avant-garde expression that used new painting strategies and the readymade to carry out a direct critique of the tradition of landscape painting in Vancouver. The reprisal of early twentieth century avant-garde devices such as collage, assemblage, and the readymade has been identified by Hal Foster as lying at the heart of the “neo-avant-garde” of the 1950s and 1960s. As demonstrated by The West Coast Now exhibition in 1968, the “neo-avant-garde” in Vancouver had achieved a strong and clear voice.

By 1968, increased violence in Vietnam, the events of May ’68 in Paris, and the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. resonated in North American culture, including in Vancouver. Disillusionment set in and the culture of “endless possibilities” where advocacy could effect change started to wane. In theory and intellectual practices, structuralism and post-structuralism, primarily in the work of Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida, ushered in new strategies of cultural critique where representation was explored and analyzed using semiotics, deconstruction, and psychoanalysis. Institutions, such as schools and museums, became objects of social critique. Specifically, they were understood as playing a productive role in structuring social power relations through linguistic signification and identity performance. Feminism in particular critiqued the role of institutions in constructing and embedding gender roles and patriarchal structures of language. The artistic avant-garde shifted with these social and intellectual developments. Language

and conceptual art, for example, became sites for exploring social and psychic subjectivity and institutional critique.

Certainly by 1969, avant-garde art production in Vancouver had a critical edge, in the Foucauldian sense. In photographic and language work, Wallace and Wall, for example, engaged in an analysis of power relations informed by Marxist social critique and structuralist queries into the signifying power of language. However, I do not want to suggest that the preceding Vancouver artists such as Baxter, Lee-Nova, Breeze, and Fisher, for example, were apolitical or that they worked in an intellectual vacuum because their critique was not as pointedly theoretical. These artists were political – their awareness of the local, their rejection of regional tradition, and their artistic self-definition were all political acts. Furthermore, their role in the construction of the west coast as an alternative space – alternative to American militarism and anti-communism, to Euro-Canadian cultural tradition and to the artistic dominance of New York – was a profoundly political act. Part of my argument is that in order for the avant-garde of 1969 to emerge, there had to already have been a form of local social and cultural awareness and a critical motivation for change.

Following The West Coast Now, art practices in Vancouver splintered. Groups pursued diverse avenues of production and criticism, such as concrete poetry, performance, language art, and photography. Foster’s formulation of the neo-avant-garde can be applied to Vancouver, specifically his assertion that it included two interdependent formations. The first in the early 1960s reprised dada devices, specifically collage, the readymade and happenings and, in effect, institutionalized the historical avant-garde. This return provoked the second incarnation of the neo-avant-garde in the late 1960s to critique both the process of institutionalization and
previous avant-garde formations.\textsuperscript{143} This double-action of the avant-garde played out in Vancouver. In the mid 1960s, artists such as Lee-Nova, Morris, and Baxter used collage and the readymade as returns to dada. At the end of the sixties, Wall and Wallace took up language and conceptual practices as both an extension of and challenge to their critique. In both cases, artists of the 1960s were grounded in the philosophical and aesthetic strands that Kiyooka, Balkind, Tallman, and Blaser, among others, had woven into the cultural fabric of Vancouver.

\textsuperscript{143} Hal Foster, 21-4. Foster uses the examples of Robert Rauschenberg and Allan Kaprow as artists of the first neo-avant-garde and Daniel Buren and Marcel Broodthaers of the second.
EPILOGUE

Intersection Points: Towards a Poetics of the West Coast Avant-Garde

In December 2005, the Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst in Antwerp launched *Intertidal: Vancouver Art & Artists* as part of a series of exhibitions examining localities of art production within globalization. Other “peripheral” sites of investigation in the series were post-Soviet Russia and China where the post-cold war politics of de-territorialization took specific cultural forms. As claimed by the exhibition catalogue’s introductory essay, Vancouver’s historical status as a peripheral city was finally shattered with the emergence of the “Vancouver School” of photo-conceptualism in the 1980s that included artists Jeff Wall, Ian Wallace, Ken Lum, Rodney Graham and Roy Arden, a legacy that continues still with contemporary art practices in a “tradition of unparalleled intellectual rigour.”¹ The Belgian curators, asserting that Europe and the “Atlantic” remain the strongholds of global hegemony, set out to explore how margins operate in global cultural exchange, and in particular how Vancouver, on the outside edge of the Pacific, formed an avant-garde that plays a central role in (post)modern art discourses.²

*Intertidal*’s substantial exhibition catalogue consists of nine critical essays, including contributions from Ian Wallace, Scott Watson and William Wood, that address both the formation of the avant-garde in Vancouver and the continuing legacy

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² In Canada, the geo-political and art historical mandate of the exhibition was eclipsed by a debate that ensued over R.M. Vaughan’s controversial review of *Intertidal* published in *Canadian Art* (“Antwerp Diary,” Summer 2006, 54-68). Vaughan’s questionable critical skills and unjustified negative criticism, many felt, led to Richard Rhodes, editor of *Canadian Art*, being taken to task on the quality of criticism that he was allowing to be disseminated in Canada’s most widely circulated art magazine.
of its “first generation” in contemporary production. In writing about the genesis of the Vancouver avant-garde, two themes recur throughout the essays. The first is the argument that the earliest vanguard art (that is, the first avant-garde impulses that can be related to the Vancouver School) “hit the shores” of British Columbia in the late 1960s – “an age-defining, inaugural moment that is known as the axial ‘Dan Graham/Robert Smithson effect.’” Jeff Wall’s *Landscape Manual* (1969) and the broadside *Free Media Bulletin* (1969) edited by Duane Lunden, Wall and Wallace, were two of the first avant-garde expressions that are said to have evidenced the Graham/Smithson effect. The second is the argument that Vancouver art history is best understood as a series of three renaissances – in the fifties with modernist landscape painting, architecture and design; in the late sixties with critical “cosmopolitan” art; and in the eighties with photo-conceptualism. In this configuration, the avant-garde of the fifties came to an end and was re-born ten years later in a totally new form generated by external forces. According to this history, most of the sixties were spent shaping a counterculture - a context that provided the backdrop for the “critical” production that would begin in 1969. Wall secured this dichotomous understanding of Vancouver art history when he argued that art in the sixties branched into two opposing groups - “island” art vs. urban art, the latter representing art inflected by the Graham/Smithson effect.

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3 The history of art in Vancouver has in sizeable part been written by the practitioners themselves, for example, Wall, Wallace, Lum and Arden, who have also been the teachers of succeeding generations. Vancouver art history, or history of the avant-garde, has been dominated by a type of pedagogical lineage which has further been supported by historians (and critics) such as Watson and Wood. See William Wood, “The Insufficiency of the World,” in *Intertidal*, 62-77.


6 Jeff Wall, “Four Essays on Ken Lum,” in *Ken Lum* (Rotterdam: Witte de With and Winnipeg: Winnipeg Art Gallery, 1990), 39. Despite the intentions of *Intertidal* curators, including Watson, who named the exhibition for the hybridity that characterizes tidal zones, thus challenging fixed binaries
My study ends where most histories of Vancouver avant-garde art begin. Free Media Bulletin has been framed as an early avant-garde text that demonstrates the “importance of consciousness to conceptualist thinking.” However, in my narrative, the broadside was the culmination of vanguard activities that had already taken place in Vancouver during the 1960s. In subject matter and format, the broadside was an extension of the poetics and aesthetics of the west coast, including both the San Francisco Renaissance and Los Angeles art practices. Wall, Wallace and Lunden included in Free Media Bulletin dada texts on the radical potential of the readymade, including “Readymade Notes from the Green Box 1912-1923,” by Marcel Duchamp, “Dada Lives!” by Richard Huelsenbeck, and “Toward a Poetic of the Readymade,” by Arturo Schwarz. The editors were also informed by the philosophy of the west coast avant-garde. For example, from City Lights Books they included “A Revolutionary Proposal,” by Alexander Trocchi and “Revolt Against Poetry,” by Antonin Artaud, the latter of which had already been made part of the cultural dialogue by Wallace in The Ubyssey in 1966. The editors also included a text by visionary environmental architect Paolo Soleri who was featured at the 1963 Festival of the Contemporary Arts. From the San Francisco anthology Astronauts of Inner Space (1966), they selected W.S. Burroughs’ “The Literary Techniques of Lady Sutton-Smith.”

These inclusions derived less from New York conceptualist thinking than from the ethos of the west coast and open form poetics in California. Astronauts of Inner Space and Wallace Berman’s Semina were two broadsides that, like Free

such as centre/periphery and island/urban, the dichotomy still endures in the writing of Vancouver art history.

7 Watson, 35.
8 The broadside republished “Hostile Art” (Jean Toche) and “The Next Revolution in Art” (Ad Reinhardt). Also included were two photographic projects by Bill Vazan.
*Media Bulletin*, assembled dada, surrealist, Situationist, beat, and other avant-garde texts. Trocchi, Artaud, and Burroughs were each featured in one or both of the California anthologies. In addition to sharing intellectual and aesthetic sources, the physical layout of the *Free Media Bulletin* was in keeping with the tradition of the west coast little magazine. A hand-made assemblage of photocopies, type-written pages, and floating images, *Free Media Bulletin* was constructed in the same manner as *blew ointment, Semina* and *Astronauts of Inner Space.* Unlike Ed Ruscha’s little books that were sleek and clean, *Free Media Bulletin*, gritty and raw, was an aesthetic manifesto that continued to query the readymade and its implications in experience, awareness and art.⁹

Wall and Wallace in particular were drawn to the little magazine and its typed page format. In addition to working prolifically as an art reviewer in local newspapers, Wallace also produced visual and textual collages in *blew ointment.* Wall’s two-year role as a satirical cartoonist for *The Ubyssey* revealed his interest in the relationship between image and text. In *Free Media Bulletin*, the interface between image and text and its effect on the viewer/reader/listener was a major theme. Burroughs’ “Literary Techniques of Lady Sutton-Smith,” for example, was a playful instruction on the technique of literary cut-ups derived from the intersection between sight and sound. As early as 1966, Wallace had expressed an interest in “intersection points” and argued that in the work of John Cage and Merce Cunningham the interplay of independent forces is “at the juncture of every single experience and in everything we do.”¹⁰ Dennis Wheeler described *Free Media Bulletin* as an envelope of socio-aesthetic documents that grounded the work of Wall,

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⁹ In an interview with John Coplans in 1965, Ruscha asserted that his books were not concerned with the readymade but rather with “‘a kind of polish...a clear-cut machine finish. They have none of the nuances of the hand-made and crafted limited edition book.” *Artforum* (vol. III, no. 5, Feb 1965), 25.

Wallace and Lunden in a new formulation of “landscape.” A continuation of the reconfiguration of landscape that started in Vancouver in 1965 with Balkind’s Beyond Regionalism, the Free Media Bulletin “landscapes” were about urban and industrial environments and the viewer’s awareness of them. Wheeler asserted that the relationship between subjects and their environment can be understood as “intersections in time and space of objects and even our own imaginations...[and] are determinates more powerful than any reductive formalist statement.”

In “A Literature of Images,” Wallace presented a new strategy for the production and reception of images. Based on a structuralist understanding of representation - that language and words are material “facts” that acquire meaning only through perceptual and cognitive relationships - Wallace wanted objects and images to be treated as if they were “free words.” In art production, Wallace argued, images had become burdened by history and loaded symbols of media power. In order to “free images from the clichés of historical and aesthetic interpretation,” they needed to be released from their historical and social systems of control, particularly the gallery system.

When freed from the stultification caused by the art market, Wallace argued, images could act as points of intersection or indexes in consciousness. He looked to the little magazine poets as a valuable model for not “selling out” and wanted to emulate their integrity and commitment to the freedom of speech.

The format of the little mag has a lot to do with this. The inexpensiveness and availability of it, the control the poet has...
over his own media, and even more important to the personal statement is the personal response – the page is confronted in the reader’s private space.\textsuperscript{13}

“Little mag” poets such as Robin Blaser, Jack Spicer, bill bissett, Burroughs, and Robert Creeley, who controlled their own publication and circulation through journals such as \textit{Pacific Nation}, \textit{blew ointment}, \textit{Semia}, and \textit{Tish}, provided an example of how to protect individual imagination. Most important to Wallace was the format of the “little mag” that included text and images and allowed the poet to control his or her own personal statement. However, the “page format” was not a fixed space for the poet but rather an open space for both the poet and reader and was neither private nor social. Only in the “eyes and hands” of the reader, Wallace wrote, do images become meaningful in dynamic relationship with the reader’s imagination and environment.

“A Literature of Images” reveals Wallace’s engagement with the broad theoretical and intellectual discourses of 1969, specifically (post)structuralism’s concern with semiotics and the role of language in meaning-making. However, its specificity as a Vancouver avant-garde text lies in its connection with west coast poetics. The fact that Wallace grounded his artistic treatise in the “little mag” poets reveals the extent to which the practice of poetry in Vancouver, and on the west coast, shaped the parameters of a visual avant-garde.

In “The Insufficiency of the World,” William Wood analyzes the function of the term “counter-tradition” within the construction of Vancouver art history. First articulated in the mid-1980s with the international rise of the Vancouver School, the term was used by Wallace and Wall to delineate their practices as being in the tradition of critical modernism but in polar opposition to local traditions in Vancouver art, such as “uncritical” painting, including landscape painting and parochial

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., n. pag.
romanticism. Re-enforcing his distinction between “island” and urban art, Wall asserted that his work and that of the Vancouver School was not representative of Vancouver art. He wrote:

It should be remembered that this work developed not out of the major trends and traditions...but out of a continuous rejection of them... The development of this work did not take place in any harmony with the local context but in contradiction to it. This is the meaning of the term counter-tradition.14

Wood explains how the Vancouver avant-garde has produced itself in negation or opposition to local traditions. The practitioners of the “counter-tradition” created the terms of the binary opposition (island/urban) and through the rejection of their purported opposite secured their status as the avant-garde.

Artistic identification in Vancouver is thus forced into one of two traditions – either that of “island” art or that of the critical art of the “counter-tradition.” But the practice of poetry - beat, projective, and Black Mountain - was also a tradition in Vancouver. As I have demonstrated, open form poetics took hold in Vancouver in 1961 with Robert Duncan’s spearheading of Tish and became entrenched with the Vancouver Poetry Conference in 1963. The culture of poetry played a profound intellectual and aesthetic role throughout the decade and its impact on Free Media Bulletin was no exception. The sixties in Vancouver have often been written about as a decade of static utopianism and countercultural idealism. By contrast, I am arguing that the 1960s be considered as a complex and textured period when radical American poetics were digested and adapted by Vancouver artists. Certainly, Wall, Wallace, Lunden, and Wheeler participated in the culture of poetry in the mid-1960s and their work in 1969 reflected it.

14 Wall quoted in Wood, 64.
*Intertidal* sought to engage the politics of location in order to get at the specificity of local production. However, it fell short because it perpetuated the notion that "critical" art "hit the shores" of British Columbia in the late 1960s as waves of New York conceptualist thought. The cultural and historical specificity of Vancouver and the west coast is all but lost in the *Intertidal* account, particularly the open form poetics that complicate the binary construction of Vancouver art history. Perhaps "the city" within the politics of de-territorialization is too narrow to serve as a model of art historical analysis. *Re*-territorialization, the process through which spaces are re-made, re-configured and re-imagined, is a more productive and provocative model for understanding the complexity and richness of place. Since the early 1960s, Vancouver has fought against intellectual isolation to become an intersecting point within larger spatial configurations, specifically the west coast. As a counter-site to "Atlantic" hegemony, the specific artistic and intellectual histories of the "Pacific" offer possibilities for new understandings of global cultural formations.
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