

IAIN BAXTER& & the Ampers&



“Don’t look at this unless you’re ready for anything. -- Ok. Sit down and with a pair of scissors cut 4 inches off your tie and please mail it immediately to Iain Baxter Pres. N.E.Thing Co (address supplied)... Now you are ready for anything.” (1967 N.E.Thing Co. Xerox.) Disclosure; I did cut 4 inches off my tie recently and sent it to **IAIN BAXTER&** now we’re collaborating on an art & ecology set of paintings.

Over the years we learn that it is not enough to stand on the shoulders of giants. Many found they were standing on the shoulders of very short giants, or worse. the giants were standing on their shoulders! So we’re then grateful that **IAIN BAXTER** is empathic, he’s intelligent, and his art is into ecology; basically he’s the gentle green giant in the art world.

I discovered Baxter’s “Animal Reserve”^[1] artwork, caught by the drama of comedy and tragedy, the classic Greek theatre of smile and frown! **BAXTER&** is one whom the Japanese would call a living national treasure. Since his early twenties Iain was into Zen and now he’s achieved the maturity of a Zen master, as in “Zen and the art of motorcycle maintenance”. Zen is a spiritual discipline; it’s an art of self-awareness and acting from instinct, so that you’re in the right place at the right time.

Such as published on the cover of Art in America, the 1969 May-June issue when critics Thomas M. Messer and David L. Shirey first introduced conceptual art to the American public. For the cover image they chose the work of N.E.Thing Co., Canadian artists Ian Baxter and his wife at Ingrid Baxter^[2] This was years before Iain added the ampersand to his name, which he legally changed to **BAXTER&**.



In researching this article I am grateful to Dr. Adam Lauder, W.P. Scott Chair for Research in e-Librarianship at York University in Toronto, Canada, whose books on **BAXTER&** are the authoritative works in the field.² Writers Richard Cavell, Dennis W. Durham, Murray White, Derek Knight also contributed insightful articles on Canada's first conceptual artist (with Michael Snow). Rather than cover similar ground I wanted to see this artist in the matrix of his time and apply a McLuhanesque analyses of method and consequence, following McLuhan's dictum that the medium is the message.

McLuhanesque segue

We invite you to immerse yourself in **IAIN BAXTER&** images and artwork
https://legrady.com/iain_images/index.html

Life for **BAXTER&** is for curiosity, not authority. To unpack that we see Iain as that man who walks untroubled through the valley of shadows, intuitively avoids pitfalls while discovering solutions to problems we weren't even aware of. Although his work often caused outrage he got away with it because his vision matched the cultural interests of his time; his voice spoke for many. Where did that come from? Read **IAIN BAXTER&**'s artist statement

One major strategy was Iain's acting on instincts and trusting in chance. That extended to a meeting Louise by chance, a woman whose last name was Chance. **BAXTER&** has lived in Windsor, Ontario, Canada since 1988 with his wife & collaborator of thirty years Louise Chance Baxter& and their cat Molson. But let's start at the beginning.



IAIN BAXTER's work has been shown in major museums world wide such as MOMA and Centre Pompidou. BAXTER holds five honorary doctorates from The University of British Columbia, Simon Fraser University, NSCAD University, the University of Windsor, & most recently OCAD University, & AUART, University Alberta. He is a Companion of the Order of Canada, 2019, a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, an officer of the Order of Ontario and the Order of British Columbia. He is a Member of the Royal Canadian Academy.

Among the many awards he has received are the Queen's Diamond Jubilee Medal in 2012, the Canadian Council Molson Prize for the Arts in 2005, the Gershon Iskowitz prize in 2006, & the Canadian Governor General's Award in Visual & Media Arts in 2004. He was winner of the Melva J. Dwyer Award Winner in 2013.

He has taught at the University of British Columbia, Simon Fraser University, The Emily Carr Institute of Art & Design, The Alberta College of Art, & York University; during his time at Simon Fraser University BAXTER was responsible for creating the department of Visual Arts. He currently serves as a distinguished University professor Emeritus at the University of Windsor's Center of Creative Arts, SOCA.

Iain is a painter, photographer, sculptor, mixed media artist, installation artist, film & video maker, interventionist & performance artist. Along with Michael Snow C.C. one of the first conceptual artist in Canada. As an educator, IAIN BAXTER C.C. directly influenced major Canadian artists including Stan Douglas, Ian Wallace, Jeff Wall, Roy Arden, Ken Lum and Rodney Graham.

ibaxter@uwindsor.ca
the.aanndmmaann@gmail.com

At age 19 a car accident, a broken neck and body cast, a wake up call. Psychology says early trauma shapes character that may otherwise spoil for lack of challenge. Iain had to give up training in competitive sports and renounce a ski scholarship so he went for the sciences, with an interest in biology and ecology; this wasn't a traditional art education. In biology, his aptitude for drawing field specimens led to a gig illustrating a professor's book, which brought him to visual art. An interest in Zen took him to Japan on an art scholarship. He created abstract expressionist paintings on Japanese folding screens, bridging two cultures at the start of his career, those screens are still powerful today.

Science and sports are reality checks, they shape one's attitude: **BAXTER** surprises even when his process is ubiquitous. In 1966 he and his then wife Ingrid Baxter established the N.E. Thing Co., reframing Fine Art as a Corporate Practice. At age 32 he was the youngest living Canadian artist selected to create a large-scale multi-media environment at the National Gallery of Canada. From June 1 to July 8, 1969, **BAXTER** transformed the entire lower floor of the National Gallery of Canada into the corporate headquarters of the N.E. Thing Co.

In 1977 they opened EYE SCREAM, a restaurant with an artful menu such as Still-Life Salad and Scallops Renoir. "We had a Canada Council grant to travel in Europe and we had no job to come back to in Canada. We thought about applying for the job of humans at the Vancouver Zoo because then we'd have a roof over our heads and we'd be fed and taken care of. We decided to do the Eye Scream restaurant as a survival technique." The name was premonitive; the financial stress of that venture led to their divorce and the dissolution of N.E. Thing Co. I scream.

IAIN BAXTER&'s cv for the following years shows photography and video playing a large role in his work. In 1992 Iain and Louise were concerned about the province of Quebec seceding in an upcoming referendum, so they decided to drive across Canada and document the country while it was still whole. From sea to shining sea. *One Canada Video* lasts 101 hours and follows them from Cape Spear, Newfoundland to Vancouver Island. This video includes audience participation.

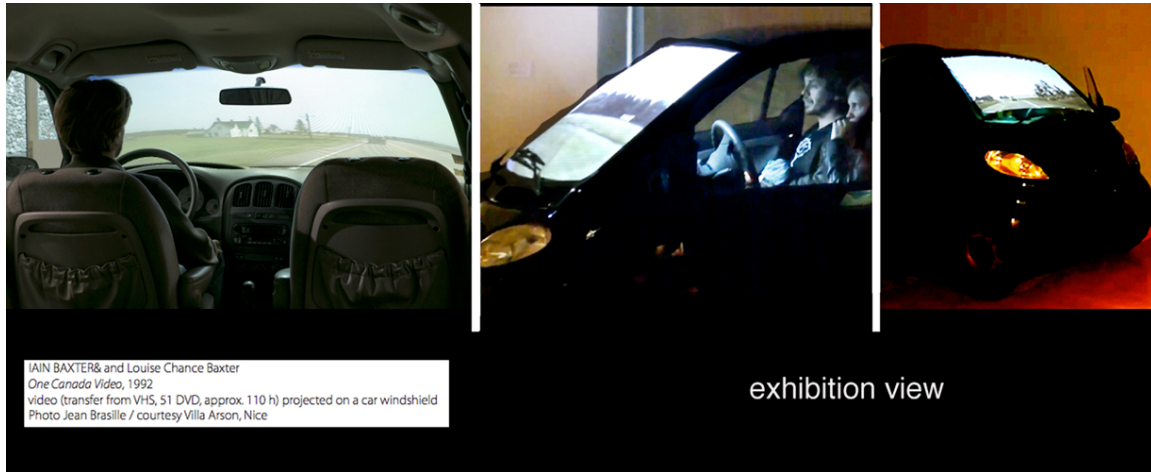


Photo: Jean Basille / Courtesy Villa Arson, Nice

One Canada Video is projected on the windshield of a car placed in the gallery; one can sit inside the car to view this rolling Canadian landscape, or stand outside and see the journey projected on the windshield. The audience was free to walk away once sated, knowing Canada would continue rolling even in their absence; that continuity a liminal extension of the project's motif. The car strategy contextualized the footage and the work did end up representing Canada overseas; it was shown, among other venues, at the 40th anniversary of the Canadian Cultural Centre in Paris.

It's fitting to compare this video with *Empire*, a 1964 American black-and-white silent film by Andy Warhol, eight hours and five minutes of slow motion footage of an unchanging view of the Empire State Building. Warhol said about his films that they're more interesting to talk about than to watch. "The most interesting art of our time is boring" wrote Susan Sontag five years later, but if their most interesting art is boring it can only mean they failed.

If it's boring then it's not interesting, it's certainly not the most interesting; sounds like it's hyped marketing when they failed to nail it. And no, it's not so sophisticated it's beyond us, also hyped marketing. It was creative of Warhol to shoot *Empire* since great art takes risk. The film however was a dud. We seriously need to distinguish failure from success or we'll go extinct.

Since **BAXTER&**'s video is interesting to watch and discuss, this contrast between *One Canada Video* and *Empire* marks the limits of dematerialization.

"Lucy Lippard and John Chandler (1968), coined dematerialization, to refer to conceptual artists' de-emphasis of the visual properties of the art

object in favour of ephemeral and linguistic gestures that trouble the formalist criteria enshrined in the influential criticism of Clement Greenberg as well as the commodity status of the artwork.”⁴

Why would artists derail the commodity status that generates their income, when logically it's the last thing they would want? But we digress. Today we know Clement Greenberg's formalist narrative was as superficial as Duchamp's misreading of the optical⁵. Both lacked the science that reveals layers of meaning in visionality. Greenberg assumed that forms exist for their own sake, totally oblivious to the fact that words and letters do not exist for their own sake but to express meaning through language, even when beautifully written. To de-emphasize the visual properties of visual art is non sense, considering what science says about the importance of non-verbal languages.

Greenberg is really a quixotic windmill because... science. Non-verbal languages are vital modes of communication functioning alongside intellectual thought and written text. This was obvious to **IAIN BAXTER**®, witness his practice and teaching focused on action and interaction, using new media more than textual analytics.

“Baxter experimented with techniques of non-verbal pedagogy that radicalized McLuhan's critique of print-based classroom procedure. Incorporating found objects gleaned from his urban explorations, Baxter's lectures at UBC and later at Simon Fraser University mimed a choreography of generic actions (such as ‘swimming on dry land’)”.⁶

Paul Dirac, Steven Mithen, Abraham Males, Frieder Nake all wrote on the importance and complexity of non-verbal languages. Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio said that “every perceptual experience is accompanied by emotional coloration - an evaluation of subtle shades of good or bad, painful or pleasurable, dark or light, a spectrum of cognitive and emotional memories, providing an instant valuation... art is not mere "cheesecake" for the mind. It is instead a cultural adaptation of great significance.” Dennis Dutton writes that we can explain art more effectively through instinct and anthropology than “through an American version of French theory or a Frankfurt school in contemporary art criticism”, as MOMA-Yale's Rob Storr put it.

Albert Mehrabian (born 1939 to an Armenian family in Iran), currently Professor Emeritus of Psychology, UCLA, is known for his publications on the relative importance of verbal and nonverbal messages. His findings on inconsistent messages of feelings and attitudes have been misquoted and misinterpreted throughout human communication seminars worldwide, and have also become known as the 7%-38%-55% Rule, for the relative impact of words, tone of voice, and body language when speaking. Kevin Zeng Hu, a Ph.D. researcher at the MIT Media Lab, writes “we all know how unwieldy texting can be and how much context can be lost, especially emotional context. Once you make it visual, you have a higher bandwidth to convey nuance.”

Thus we have body language, whose formal aspect is dance, acoustic language, formal aspect is music, and visual language, where a picture is worth 800 words after inflation.

It seems that aesthetics, beauty, and other sensory artifacts and algorithms are never neutral, they always carry unconscious content reflecting the cultural currents and conflicts of the times. In nature a bee's dance informs the hive of the location of a field of flowers, including sun-oriented hourly-based data and the caloric value of that patch. All without any consciousness that a human can discern. This leads to far reaching speculation on unconscious content in the artwork of the naked ape!

To understand the times, the 1960s were a rebellious cultural renaissance; Pop art was la mode while postmodernism was born in the seminar room and sent out with each new wave of fine art graduates. Enter **IAIN BAXTER** at the right time and place. As an educator, **BAXTER** directly influenced major Canadian artists including Stan Douglas, Ian Wallace, Jeff Wall, Roy Arden, Ken Lum and Rodney Graham.

Enter *Bagged Place* and *Bagged Landscape*; Christo wrapped but Iain bagged. While appreciating the strategic parallel with Christo, bagging is a North American suburban practice of saving for future use. In *Bagged Place* Iain bagged it all, every fork and chair and drape, all the socks in the closet and baby's bagged poo inside the bagged toilet. *Bagged Room* made the personal conceptual and monumental at the same time.

McLuhan saw that communication shortens space to create a global village; **IBAXTER**'s *Bagged Place* narrowed the distance between home and gallery, self and stage; *Bagged Place* narrowed the distance between home and gallery, self and stage. Foreboding problems of plastic pollution are ever present in this work, testing what technology does to iconography and ecology.



Inflated vinyl and Water (Bagged Landscape), 1966, Polyvinyl chloride, plastic, metal, 73 x 58 x 8 cm. Collection of the Vancouver Centennial Award Purchase Prize. Photo: Trevor Mills, Vancouver Art Gallery

Iain extended bagging to a *Bagged Landscape* series, sparking the 1966 scandal when the Vancouver Art Gallery awarded *Inflated Vinyl and Water* a \$500 prize and purchased the work for its collection. There were protests and outrage. The Vancouver Sun issued its opinion about Baxter's landscape being chosen as a winner of the Centennial Award in a headline that summed up the editorial: "Fun's Fun, But Not at \$500." That prize is equivalent in purchasing power to about \$4,154.24 today. The editorial obliquely referred to an "inflated vinyl cushion as the best new B.C. Painting of the year". The "painting" itself is both hilarious and playful. Sadly this item was temporarily removed from the show because it sprung a leak.

Lippard and Chandler's emphasis on dematerializing visual art may apply here, but I doubt **IAIN BAXTER** intended the denial of tradition as anything more than a by-product of playful curiosity. Breaking the rules does trigger creativity but traditional rules turn irrelevant when clearly following one's intuition. **BAXTER** bagged a landscape which he made aesthetic, ironic, iconic, then he added water and closed the stopper. He submitted this work to the jury.

Protests against *Inflated Vinyl and Water* bemoaned Iain's low-art plastic compared to Emily Carr's high-art cardboard paintings, without realizing the irony that cardboard should now be seen as high art. There was talk of degradation of contemporary Canadian art, of extended harm to both the culture and the arts community if cardboard was replaced with plastic. Now with forty years of hindsight we can answer that question, determine if they were luddites or cassettes. Could Iain's *Inflated Vinyl and Water* cause inestimable damage to Canada's art ecology? The answer of course is yes.

Art as radar acts as "an early alarm system," as it were, enabling us to discover social and psychic targets in lots of time to prepare to cope with them.
McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (p. 7). Gingko Press. Kindle Edition.

Art is to culture like an architect's blueprint, or the physicist's blackboard on which they chalk their equations. Paul Derrida's method of deconstruction was to look past the irony and ambiguity to the layer that genuinely threatens to collapse that system. In this case Paul Dirac writes that whenever he sees beauty in his math he knows he's on the right path of progress, while if the beauty is lacking the equations are likely wrong. It makes sense to ask if the science behind beauty also applies to visual art. *Inflated Vinyl and Water* has definite pop-art beauty. Still, sparks flew as Iain exposed a postmodern flash point.

He triggered questions of vulnerability, standards of quality, definitions and limitations, whose importance would take years even to nudge the consciousness of an art community. People get absorbed in personal details then fail at large-scale perspective; we're still haven't answered these conflicts sparked 55 years ago. For example, when a new category is introduced in the pie chart, the other slices get narrower. We also need to understand the role of effort, time, and ideas, and how a work can succeed or fail, and how we can differentiate between work that is amazing and work that's mediocre.

Reagan Upshaw is an American gallerist who writes on art for the Washington Post; "to say most art today is mediocre is merely to state an historical fact – most art of any period is mediocre. History will sort things out".

When Iain spent a few hours cutting out his plastic and assembling *Inflated Vinyl and Water*, he had no desire nor interest in crashing theologies. Nor was he thinking of a rebellious Samson-like tearing down temples of tradition, that was a by-product of the

ideological weakness of art theory since the 1960s. Out of a creative curiosity **IAIN BAXTER&** cut to the chase on conflicts of our times, and he did it with a cute little piece of wall art now enhanced by its cultural status as a shit disturber.

This conceptual height isn't for everyone; he warned that most people overleap the saddle to end up on the wrong side of the horse. Hopefully Marshall McLuhan's "art is anything you can get away with" was an observation and not an endorsement, for without limitations we dissolve in the boundless. When art is anything you can get away with, the worst you can get away with is always the best strategy, a race to the bottom in a steady degradation of the field. Even the words "get away with" call for ethical logistics if not for some questions about ethics and logic.

One curator wrote that no one knows what art is anymore. Yet in our time every other profession knows what they're doing. So if we don't know what art is, shouldn't try to find out? At least make the effort? A professor critiqued a student's work without using good or bad by saying those poor plants crushed for linseed oil surely regret ending up in that painting.

If we don't know what art is, if there's no good or bad, there's no differentiation, meaning, or purpose. But since art has a long history of meaning purpose, it is more likely that some art is good, some bad, some elsewhere on the spectrum; we need to develop the skills and standards by which to judge the difference or else forfeit our claim of professionals in our field.

IAIN BAXTER& has a gift. His concepts and works hit the target more often than others do, even at those times when none can see the target or even know it exists. Psychology says consciousness is often the last to know, as our destinies and desires are forged in the unconscious depths of the mind. *Inflated Vinyl and Water* was a logical product of an interest in ecology and it touched a nerve.

McLuhanesque segue

Immerse yourself in **IAIN BAXTER&**'s history
https://legrady.com/iaain_links.html

Clinical psychology notes a person scores higher when motivated by innate curiosity; Iain took advantage of curiosity's spark through a Zen attitude of non-attachment to any single media. He said an idea will come to him in the form of word play, the way a child might play with language, perhaps a word, sentence, dictum or truism, then expressed as a work of art using any medium at hand.

Conceptual art is not carved in stone; it's an umbrella term for work where concept is dominant. For **BAXTER&** adapting media to idea meant constantly switching technique, touching on Marshall McLuhan's point that the method changes the maker. In **BAXTER&**'s art the inconsistency of media triggered the creativity of unique solutions.

Conceptual art is not carved in stone; it's an umbrella term for work where concept is dominant. For **BAXTER&** that meant constantly switching technique and material, touching on Marshall McLuhan's point that the method changes the maker. In **BAXTER&**'s art the inconsistency triggered the creativity.

Conceptual art also has a side that scrapes against our nerves like an errant car scraping against a concrete embankment. Complaints center around conceptual artists whose work is narcissistic, manipulative and nihilistic. Iain avoided all that from the start, a strong concern for ecology and a sense of humor being an integral part of his work, a positive message, a vital political one. **IAIN BAXTER&** represents conceptual art's amazing and exciting side, the eye opener, the unexpected, the creative.

BAXTER& often speaks of creative compost, and for that, leaves have to fall. He is one of the few artists who can and should do what he does, since his modus operandi is ecology, language, and discovery. He's like a stone skipping over the waters of creativity, that skips from one media to another then bounces again; unlike the stone Iain doesn't sink but stays in the game, as each project energizes the next.

History is often written on the intersection of truth and legend. It is the work of the historian to separate legend from reality, and to speculate on the lessons and strategies of our culture's development.⁶ That's **IAIN BAXTER&**'s legacy as artist and teacher; he ever stopped working, for even now he creates new stars in the post-Gutenberg galaxy.

McLuhanesque segue

View the collaborative ecology paintings by **IAIN BAXTER&** & Miklos Legrady
<https://legrady.com/paintings/bees/index.html>

Miklos Nikolaus Legrady
310 Bathurst st.
Toronto ON, CAN
M5T2S3
647-292-1846
Toronto Editor,
New Art Examiner (U.K.)
<https://legrady.com>

Sources

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http://ccca.concordia.ca/artists/artist_info.html?languagePref=en&link_id=844&artist=Iain+BAXTER%26

2- N.E. Thing Co. was a Canadian art collective producing work from 1967 to 1978.

Based in Vancouver, British Columbia, N.E. Thing Co. was run by co-presidents Iain Baxter and Ingrid Baxter.

3-Adam Lauder, Sitca catalogue

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https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Iain-Baxter-Non-Verbal-Teaching-Swimming-on-Dry-Land-ca-1964-1966-Courtesy-Iain_fig3_321636239

7- **IAIN BAXTER**& Artist statement – https://legrady.com/iain_statement.html