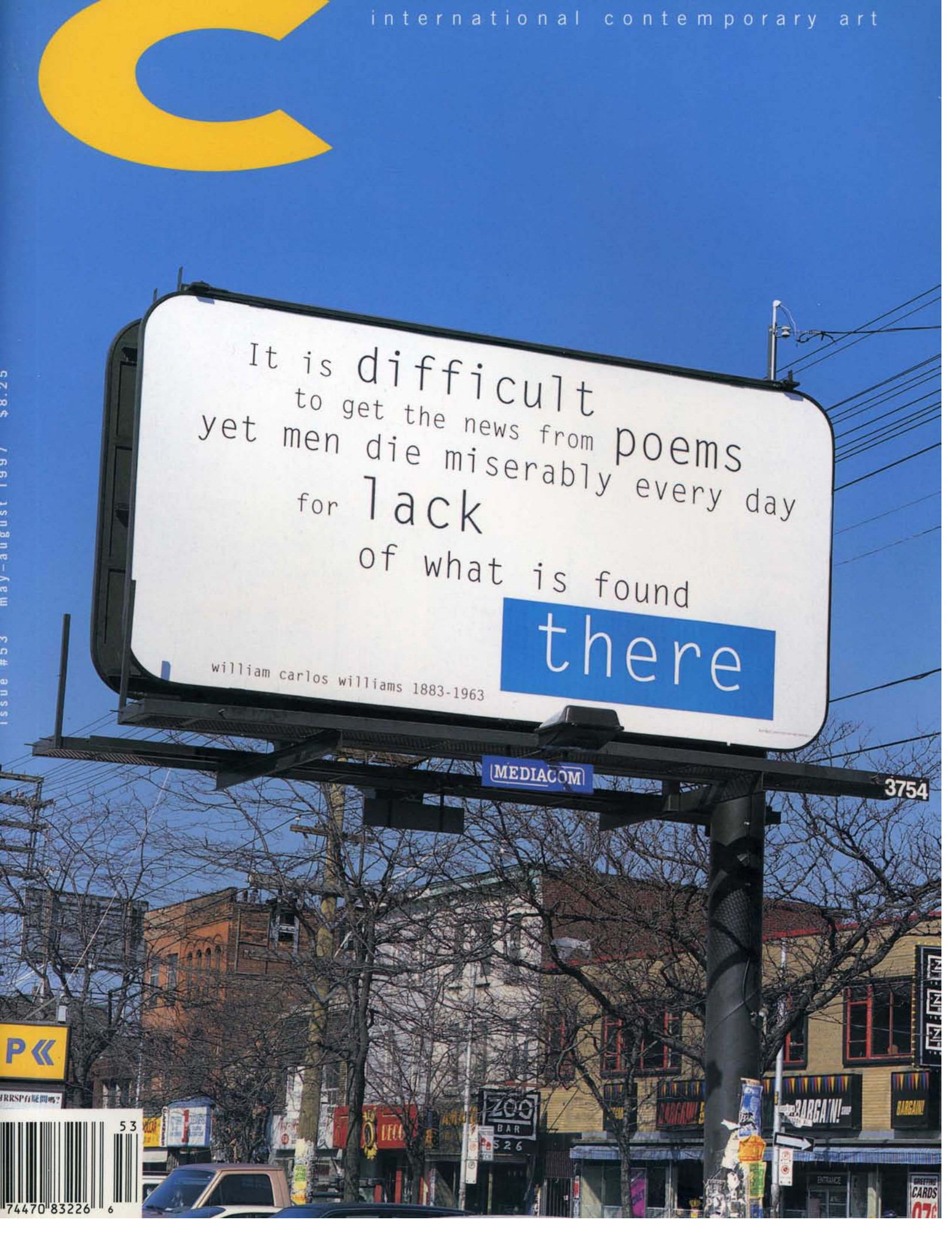
international contemporary art



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Cover: Alfredo Jaar, *It is difficult to get the news* ... (1997), billboard, 10 x 20 ft, installed on Queen St W at Portland St, Toronto, Canada, adapted (sky has been extended) from a photo by Peter MacCallum, courtesy Art Metropole (see feature, page 30)

Contents: Kara Walker, untitled (1997), detail of installation, paper, photo by Tom Van Eynde, courtesy The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago (see review, page 54)

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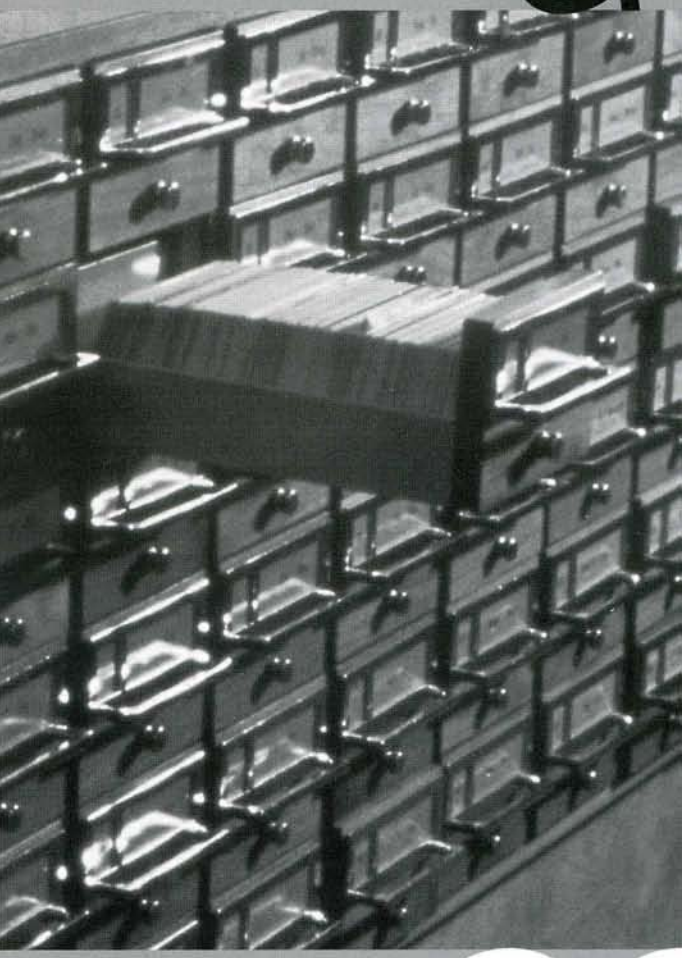
an interview with Cliff Eyland by Ray Cronin



Now based in Winnipeg, artist Cliff Eyland spent many formative and professional years in Halifax. As an artist, Eyland has exhibited widely at parallel galleries across Canada. He is also a freelance curator and writer and sees these activities as important extensions of his work as an artist. He returned to the Maritimes last year for a solo exhibition entitled "Wildlife" at Gallery Connexion in Fredericton, where he was interviewed by Ray Cronin.

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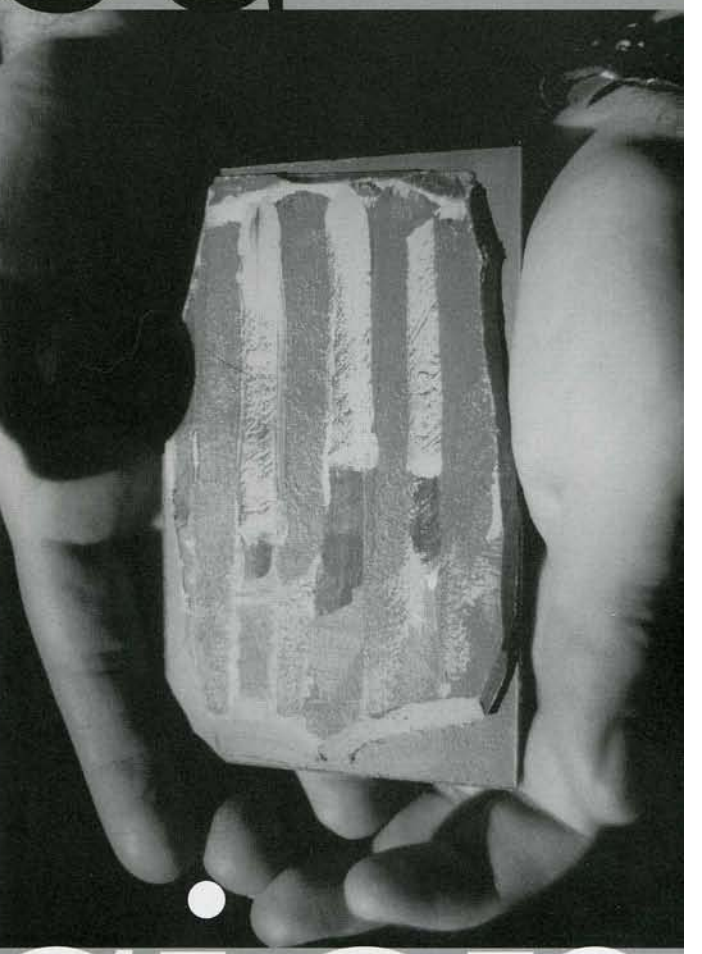


ompulsion

The works in "Wildlife" – like all of Eyland's finished paintings – are painted on three by five inch masonite board (the size of a standard file card). Though media and content vary, Eyland has always shown his paintings (which he calls samples) in sets of twenty-eight related works. If hung traditionally, each set of "samples" is an exhibition in itself, but sets may also be incorporated in various wall configurations or group exhibitions.

The samples exhibited in "Wildlife" are systematic in their approach – composing a conceptualist project made up of almost two thousand elements. But the paintings also reveal the artist's sense of play and poetry – a large body of quirky little paintings. This apparent contradiction lead to an exhibition that was engaging, funny and unorthodox.

Ray Cronin: Your paintings share strategies with early conceptualism, most notably rules-based practices, serial production and a formal uniformity – in your case the file card. However the paintings themselves are hardly what one might expect from a conceptual artist. What is the relationship between conceptualism and painterly concerns for you?

Cliff Eyland: My introduction to conceptual art happened in 1970–71 when, as a teenager, I was introduced to NSCAD [Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax] through informal art lessons from a NSCAD-student named Suzanne Paquette. She introduced me to her cool art-school friends and let me paint in her NSCAD studio. At the time, I thought of conceptual art as local, Halifax art – like folk art or marine painting, only much more interesting. As a kid I regarded conceptual art as a kind of philosophical practice that used materials as well as words. I also thought of conceptual art as a kind of physics in which the cultural properties of things are discovered.

I read Joseph Kosuth's article, "Art after Philosophy" when I was very young, and it was completely disorienting. It was, of course, the writing of an ambitious young person – he bites off more than he can chew in it, but I managed to get something out of Kosuth – perhaps an orientation.

Painting in conceptual art usually follows a reductive logic. My attraction to conceptual art had to do with its examination of the fundamentals of art – not philosophy as some kind of motif, but art as fundamental research. The use of complex, charged imagery in my painting does not look fundamental, but I think it is. Conceptual art has long since entered a postmodern discourse in which a flower or a robot painted on a file card is as fundamental an investigation as a Robert Ryman monochrome or a Sol Le Witt wall-drawing. Many kinds of painting made within a conceptual art context are full of the static of representational images: this static is unavoidable like radio interference.

Ray: How do you reconcile the drawing and painting that you do with your conceptualist framework? Is there a conflict between the aesthetic concerns of individual works and the framework as a whole?

The kind of automatic invention that you practice seems to share more with surrealism than with conceptualism. Is this a contradiction for you?

Cliff: It is a contradiction: surrealism and conceptual art. I could never ignore the implications of conceptual art, especially since I was exposed to it so early and I know that much of my imagery would never be acceptable to some of my NSCAD teachers. The aesthetic/conceptual dichotomy that you suggest does not exist for me, but I think I know what you mean.

I studied with Eric Cameron at NSCAD, but more importantly, I studied him – Cameron's thick paintings, which he had just begun, were the subject of my first art writing. He is a painter and a conceptual artist. Not a surrealist of course, but the thick paintings are full of content that cannot be reduced to his painting system. I have always been as obsessive about drawing as Cameron is about making the thick paintings. We may share a neurotic need to paint and draw, but for an artist that need not be debilitating.

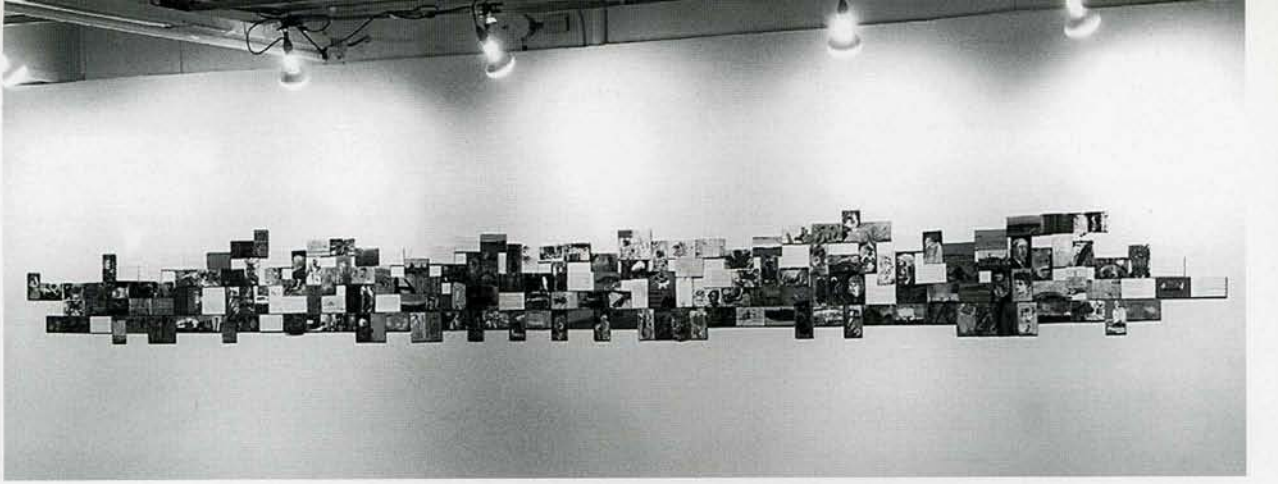
Cameron once wrote an article about Gerald Ferguson called "System and Sensibility" which sums up in three words – I'd emphasize the word sensibility – why conceptual art can even produce surrealist painting. Still, I can't take surrealism seriously as a movement in painting. Who could? I do like the idea of splicing whole art movements together in the way one would have done collage in the old days. But, surrealist conceptual art? It doesn't sound right. Also, the surrealist-looking stuff is only one type of painting that I do. It happens because I often work the way an unfashionable artist like Picasso worked in his later years: I make everything up and watch the painting form before my eyes. The difference – and of course the many differences between me and Picasso cannot be exaggerated! – is in my attitude to what I am. Picasso wouldn't think of himself as being "socially constructed," but I do. And so, when I paint I know that I am projecting something into a surface which will not only reflect the type of person that I am, but also the so-called 'inner-lives' of other people like me. I mean this in a very literal way.

Ray: Conceptualism has become a tool for many younger artists, where it was an end for its originators. The image is back. It's no longer bad; yet for many artists, there still has to be some sort of conceptual underpinning to its use. Why not just play?

Cliff: The whole tradition of trying to make the last possible painting thrived when I was a kid; but that tradition is dead now. Nobody today would have such pretensions. Instead, we have other pretensions. One of them involves making work that marks itself off as being professional art through various semiotic devices. Museum scale is one way to do this – a big painting asserts itself as serious art. Another way to mark oneself as being professional – like a professional soldier who shoots on command – is to use a conceptual art strategy to make the work. If one of my paintings is shown singly somewhere, it could easily look as if any one of a number of artists could have made it. I find that amusing. It's not that I refuse to make huge scale paintings in order to prove that a small painting can be taken seriously. I do not get anxious if someone does not grasp the bigger project, which involves hundreds of paintings the same size, but instead dismisses the painting as being too small. I have enough distance on my work to realize, however, that insiders do not confuse my painting with, say, outsider-art because they can easily see the system and sensibility in it.

You say the image is back, but you know and I know

Cliff Eyland, all works 5 x 3 in, all photos of individual works by Andrew Valko – Page 22: installation view with storage cabinet for file card paintings at Dalhousie Art Gallery (1990), mixed media / Page 23: untitled from *Borduas/Expo* (1967–97), acrylic on photocopy on masonite & untitled (1996), acrylic on masonite / Opposite page: *Belfast Gravesite* (1996), mixed media



that the image never left.

RAY: Do the images in your painting matter?

CLIFF: The images that matter for me lately are the ones that I create myself without appropriating material or even using models. When I was at NSCAD the idea that you might want to make everything up in a representational painting was considered by many to be a waste of time – inefficient. Why not borrow an image from mass culture or from another artist instead? There are so many.

After I graduated from NSCAD, I worked at an architecture school for nine years and I became fascinated with the differences between, say, representing a chair in a picture and designing a chair out of thin air – but also, in a sense, designing an imaginary chair. This struck me forcefully as I watched architecture students work at TUNS [Technical University of Nova Scotia].

RAY: How does your activity as a curator and writer factor into your project as a painter? You almost seem to curate your own work, for instance.

CLIFF: I do curate my own work, but as a curator I also make art. As a curator, I sometimes push artists until they resist as a way of testing their art. If the art fails it may become totally absorbed into a curatorial idea, but if it is successful, no curatorial idea can contain it. As for my art-writing, I think about it as letters about art to friends.

When I do a show of my own paintings I either work with a curator who writes about the stuff or I make everything myself. It's just easier for galleries to deal with. I write an essay, number and frame the works, make a file-card-sized catalogue – which looks as if it were run off by the thousands but is actually a hand-made unnumbered and unsigned limited edition that is given away or sold for one or two dollars – and I send the gallery the entire package.

RAY: In your talk at the Gallery Connexion you mentioned starting the file-card paintings at a time when painting was not in vogue at NSCAD. You (facetiously, I thought) called it painting that you could do in secret. Isn't that what you're still doing?

CLIFF: I began to make three-by-five inch paintings in 1981 and, let me tell you, painting was definitely back at NSCAD. But critiques of painting were also at their apex. Benjamin Buchloh, one of my teachers, had published his "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression" in *October* magazine. And that essay remains the most scathing critique of the return to painting, as NSCAD and the artworld were doing in the late seventies and early eighties. Lots of people were painting at the time – and there were strong instructors like Ron Shuebrook, John Clarke and Judith Mann – but Buchloh said things like, "painting is totally irrelevant." So that got my attention.

A prominent visitor to the college, Peter Fuller, met with me and called my paintings "concessions to conceptualism," but I am sure most of my fellow Buchloh classmates would have characterized them as concessions to painting.

I put paintings and other works in the book pockets of library books – that's the secret work. But, most contemporary artists probably think they make art in secret. I am always reminded of the obscurity of most contemporary art when I talk to people who are not artists – even academics in other fields. Even famous visual artists are unknown to most people.

In his essay "Art After Philosophy," Kosuth describes art as, "a kind of proposition, presented within the context of art as a comment on art." Earlier in the essay he makes clear his stance towards more traditional art forms:

> *Formalist art (painting and sculpture) is the vanguard of decoration, and, strictly speaking, one could reasonably assert that its art condition is so minimal that for all functional purposes it is not art at all, but pure exercises in aesthetics ... formalist art is only art by virtue of its resemblance to earlier works of art. It's a mindless art.*

These days the force seems to have gone out of such assertions. Few of us are so sure about what art is and is not. However, art remains something that artists are compelled to do and that compulsion drives the rest. Rules and systems contain the compulsion, give it a focus and, perhaps, give both artist and viewer the illusion of control.

In an unpublished self-portrait, Eyland once wrote: "I have always admired artists who work out of a kind of reasoned compulsion." This seems as good a description of his own practice as any, and perhaps as close to truth as a single phrase can be about a multi-faceted approach to living in the world as an artist.

Above: installation at Struts Gallery, Sackville, NB (1991), installation concept by Michael Lawlor, photo courtesy the artist