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Essais bibliographiques / Book review essays

Art exhibition catalogues

Amy Karlinsky*

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The exhibition catalogue as a form can be an odd little hybrid. Long after the exhibition has been struck, and objects returned to owners or the vault, the catalogue remains, recording the absence of presence through image and text. Sometimes it appears after the exhibition has closed, subject to the instability of gallery funding and tight time lines. Design considerations, the quality and numbers of the visual images determine how we view the catalogue and make meaning of its arrangement of images, texts and ideas. Given the competing mandates of writers, curators, designers, donors, institutions, patrons, and art councils; the exhibition catalogue as published by the art museum or gallery is, to borrow a concept from Freud, overdetermined. It is a record sometimes more, sometimes less, faithful to the exhibition experience. But verisimilitude to that experience is not necessarily the criterion of excellence when evaluating exhibition catalogues. Scholarship and new research are important components of the art writing held between the covers. Often, new data is brought to the fore by art historians and curators. The objects in question are re-contextualized or re-considered based on aesthetic and extra-aesthetic concerns. The essays extend the reach of the exhibition and set the ambulatory narrative of physical objects in space into textual form with description and argumentation. Such art writing, research and interpretation is of interest to connoisseurs, commercial dealers, donors, patrons, museologists, and academics.

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Is the purpose of the exhibition to extend connoisseurship? If so, then the bringing together of discrete objects for the benefit of close visual inspection is important for both exhibition and catalogue. Are the exhibition and catalogue part of the process of institutional or individual aggrandizement? If so, then it is more likely that boosterism rather than arguments of substance will be encountered therein.

The look and feel of the exhibition catalogue is borne of its institutional relationship to the host museum or gallery. The semiotic strategies may demand a director's waving of the flag, symbols of various art council logos, and acknowledgements of past productions. One of the catalogues under discussion here, *Rankin Inlet Ceramics* (Wight 2003) published by the Winnipeg Art Gallery (WAG), is similar in scale and shape to the well known series of exhibitions and catalogues that the WAG produced in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Slim enough to be slipped into a handbag or a pocket, these were devoted to the work of individual communities and included small but copious illustrations and relevant essays by Inuit Art experts and practitioners. They were guides for connoisseurs and dealers to help distinguish the style, iconography and materials of one community as distinct from another.

For example, the community or region, such as Port Harrison/Inoucdjouac (Inukjuak) or Rankin Inlet/Kangiqliniq served as an organizing principle for both exhibition and catalogue (Blodgett *et al.* 1977; Selby *et al.* 1981). As noted by then WAG curator Jean Blodgett in 1977, for the Port Harrison exhibition catalogue:

[This] is the first in a series of shows giving an historical survey of contemporary art from the late 1940s to the mid-70s. The series will include works from the major art-producing areas; each show being organized around a particular settlement (Blodgett *et al.* 1977: 5)

The impetus for exhibitions of community based arts flows from the introduction of Eskimo Art to a southern audience in the 1950s. From organizing principle to causal explanation, the region exerts a determining influence on style. Regional stylistic continuities are found as a result of the flavour and texture of local stone, the shared experiences in the context of a particularly forceful art adviser, or a media-based practice. More typically in art historical approaches to Inuit Art, the methodology integrates the influences exerted by communities and the special artistic abilities of individual artists in discussions of style (Hessel and Routledge 1993). The mother and child sculptures from Salluit in the 1950s, the early shamanistic narrative work produced under the Butlers in Baker Lake in the early 1970s, and the delicacy of the stencil technique of many Holman prints are three examples of stylistic coherency within a regionally defined or temporal category. The maturation and sophistication of the southern market for Inuit Art and the development of distinct artistic approaches by northern artists required conceptual approaches that would extend the analysis and interpretation of the art.

Generic catalogues and exhibitions devoted to Eskimo art and to the communities appear in counterpoint to exhibitions and catalogues of masterworks and outstanding practitioners. The historiography of Inuit art exhibitions also includes media-centric exhibitions such as drawings or wall hangings, and those related to gender. As early important collectors donate their collections to museums, these are turned into

exhibitions and catalogues for the public. *The Jerry Twomey Collection* (Wight 2004) marks the acquisition of one such collection. The donation was originally made in 1971 through the generosity of Jerry Twomey with the financial assistance of the Secretary of State in Ottawa and the Province of Manitoba. As WAG curator Darlene Wight has noted, since the donation of works collected by Twomey between 1952 and 1970, aspects of the Twomey collection have been included in almost every major exhibition of Inuit Art that the WAG has mounted.

But to return to the definition of the catalogue and its relationship to the originating event, significantly, the Canada Council for the Arts has defined the exhibition catalogue as a distinct form. The exhibition catalogue is one of the approximately 25 categories of book-like forms ineligible for financial support to publishers. Like cookbooks, self-help books and testimonials of a devotional nature, it is a “non-eligible form” for funding to real book publishers. It appears and is defined this way in a list of non-eligible items:

Catalogues of visual art exhibitions (i.e. a book of a visual artist’s work related to a specific exhibition, which includes one or more of the following elements: detailed information regarding the exhibition, a list of works exhibited, an artist’s statement, and/or provenance of the works) (Canada Council 2004).

Paradoxically, from the same list, reference books are ineligible *unless* they are about the arts. Such mistrust of the catalogue with its “detailed information” and “artist’s statement” sheds light on the contemporary context of reception. There is a general mistrust of contemporary art and its value in our culture (Barber *et al.* 1996). The skepticism comes from two distinct fronts: a growing alienation on the part of the general public towards contemporary art; and an insistence on the ideological role of art and art institutions from methodologies informed by Marxism, post structuralism and post colonialism. Power relations among artist, critic, dealer, market place and the art museum; and the discursive role of the museum have been a central focus for critical writing in the arts since the mid-1980s (Preziosi 1989). The exhibition and its catalogue, no matter how beleaguered and marginalized as a book form by the Canada Council, are understood to play into relationships of power, assignments of value, and negations or affirmations of political ideologies.

Writing on Inuit Art as it emanates from gallery exhibitions in Canada has been somewhat immune from strategies that attempt to dislodge notions of authenticity, the purity of the object, or the stability of the work’s meaning. Inuit Art as a separate category of expertise and curatorial work in major Canadian museums, apart from categories of “contemporary” or “Canadian” art, depends on an understanding of the object as pure, distinct and stable. The ghettoization of the terrain demonstrates the persistence of the racial epithet “Inuit” to confer meaning on a class of heterogeneous objects. “Inuit” as the exoticized other within the context of the museum provides its own categorical explanations of difference and race. Authenticity is constructed from a reiteration of both the artist’s voice and intention in a field where object making is seen as a means of keeping culture viable and alive. The role of art in cultural memory is often poignantly expressed by individual practitioners, such as carver Uriash Puqignak, who sees carving as a way of maintaining culture (INA 1993). The death of the author

is not a particularly relevant concept in a field where recognition of art authorship and individual practitioners is just beginning to grow and is an important part of political self definition. The challenge of validating individual artistic intentions within a critical interpretive strategy that acknowledges the role of race and ideology presents a theoretical impasse that only a few exhibitions and catalogues have been able to negotiate. This is the challenge of post colonialism within the museum structure, to have both authenticity and political critique at the same time, with a critique that accounts for the peculiar arrangement of the discursive relations of art and power. Inuit Art catalogues, in general, tend to reflect the preservationist and conservationist roles of the art museum. Narratives take the subject of Inuit Art as the beginning, middle and end of the conceptual structure so that the racializing appears natural and the need to keep Inuit Art separate from discussions about contemporary art remains intact.

Three recent exhibition catalogues that discuss aspects of Inuit Art reflect the varieties of conceptual development, treatment and organizing principles that comprise today's pluralist approaches from within the museum. The exhibition devoted to Tuu'luq was initiated and curated by independent curator and former Baker Lake art dealer, Marie Bouchard. *Marion Tuu'luq* (Bouchard 2002), published by the National Gallery of Canada is based on a one-woman exhibition of this Baker Lake artist with a focus on 37 of her wall hangings or *nivingataq*. Tuu'luq died just as the catalogue was being published and plans underway for the opening. During her lifetime, this Royal Canadian Academician and Honorary Doctor also made drawings that were transformed into prints for the Sanavik Coop in Baker Lake. She witnessed not just the "comings and goings of the shaman," to borrow a phrase from a popular 1978 WAG catalogue, but also a whole litany of arts advisers from the south. Her work was initially brought to public attention in a most significant way through the WAG's 1976 two-person exhibition of Tuu'luq and artist husband Luke Anguhadluq (Blodgett 1976).

Tuu'luq's art, unlike the careful and more symmetrical approach taken by Jessie Oonark, possibly the most famous of all textile artists in Baker Lake, is characterized by a kind of exuberant bricolage. Her working process sometimes included the use of negative cut-outs and leftover jumbles of colours, exploiting the serendipity and randomness of such choices. *Tuu'luq* includes colour reproductions of all the works in the exhibition, a treatment that lends itself well to illustrating the artist's non-naturalistic use of colour. The in-depth coverage of her art is a valuable contribution, as the detail and range of Tuu'luq's art is available for scrutiny. Art lovers will appreciate the profound and comic sensibility of Tuu'luq's art, her haptic figuration and her horror of empty spaces. Her colour and form express joy and exhilaration. The minute close-ups of embroidery illustrate the extreme care, pride, skill and technique that form Tuu'luq's art. Additional illustrations in the catalogue include documentary photos in black and white. Both the exhibition and catalogue stake a claim for Tuu'luq as a great, first generation Inuit artist.

The texts include a brief introduction by National Gallery of Canada curator Marie Routledge that locates Tuu'luq in relation to the history of Inuit Art exhibitions. Guest curator Marie Bouchard's longer and more speculative text, "Negotiating a Third

Space” relates the circumstances of Tuu’luq’s aesthetic development to the social history of the arts in Baker Lake, and some theoretical constructs that derive from postcolonial and feminist theory. Bouchard’s task is made easier by the excellent presentation of the work, although the selections of work were not chosen equally from all decades of her production. In this sense, it is not a retrospective of the artist’s work that demonstrates the development of style or iconography in a thorough way. It is more of a subjective appreciation by Bouchard. Many of the wall hangings are in private collections, so researchers, dealers and patrons are especially well served by this catalogue.

Gender as a meaningful category of analysis within conceptual approaches to Inuit Art has had a slow and unsteady development. About 20 years ago, in the exhibition catalogue *Contemporary Inuit Drawings*, anthropologist Nelson Graburn, who has contributed much to the discussion of Inuit ethnoaesthetics, attempted to isolate the operations of gender difference through visual equivalents in the two-dimensional graphic work (Graburn 1987). While his understanding of “pointed” as masculine and “roundedness” as feminine reflected an early kind of symbolic literalism with respect to gender studies his speculations catalyzed the further development of gender analyses. Subsequent exhibitions and catalogues such as *Inuit Women Artists* have contributed to feminist research by isolating the work of women from various communities and illuminating their intentions (Leroux *et al.* 1994). Oral histories served as primary documents for understanding each woman’s production. The primacy of the artist’s voice as an interpretive strategy for complex visual objects, however, can be a form of naïve positivism when it does not include formal analysis, reader response interpretations, or the meaning that accrues as the contexts for objects shift. Gender analysis requires recourse to broader socio-cultural understandings of political, economic and social influences. How, for example, might the prevalence of mother and child iconography be understood within a context that includes the historic adaptation to Christianity, and the weight of separate gender roles in child rearing activities, set within today’s economy of households and access to daycare? James Clifford’s often repeated sentiment that there are no pure products (e.g., Clifford *et al.* 1987) is relevant to the interpretation of the objects produced in the Canadian north, where hybridity, overdetermination and shifting cultural contexts might be seen as the rule as opposed to the exception.

Bouchard’s text weighs into the fray, championing the work of one woman, including aspects of biography, formal analysis, and iconography in an explicit feminist approach. Her text is based on interviews with the artist, woven into the fabric of her interpretation. She discusses how the wall hangings functioned to create a space of difference for Tuu’luq and how textile work became secondary to the prints and sculpture. The emphases on performative meaning allow us to imagine the work of a woman alone or with other women in a social space where grievances, issues, laughter and tears are transformative. Additional texts in the Tuu’luq catalogue include an “Afterword,” by the artist’s granddaughter Phoebe Anne Kudja’aq, a very detailed and useful chronology of Tuu’luq’s life, a list of relevant exhibitions and collections where the artist is represented, and a selected bibliography.

In the post-war development of the Inuit arts and crafts industry, wall hangings and textile work were initially gendered female as traditional sewing skills were applied and exploited to new forms of creation. In Baker Lake, southern art advisers Jack and Sheila Butler helped to catalyze the production of iconography related to shamanism within the graphic arts. Sheila Butler helped nurture the formal creation of textiles as real works of art (Butler 1972). This history is mostly reiterated in Bouchard's text. But as Routledge suggests in her introduction, there are questions related to the hierarchy of art over craft; and those related to the apparently separate arenas of male and female production in the communities. Routledge notes that the 1974 *Crafts from Arctic Canada* exhibition, organized by the Canadian Eskimo Arts Council (an advisory board to the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development) helped to create a gendered realm of production:

The placing of these works on cloth within a context of utilitarian and decorative objects in *Crafts from Arctic Canada* undoubtedly played a role in delaying the examination of them as art works (Routledge 2002: 13).

True, Inuit male artist Davidialuk Alasua Amittu may have experimented in batik, but this adaptation of an Indonesian craft form was never adopted on a wide scale by Davidialuk or any other male or female artists. The wall hangings with their resonance of female handicraft and separate spheres, made with duffle, stroud, felt, and cotton embroidery thread, caught the imagination of Baker Lake artists such as Jessie Onark, Marion Tuu'luq, Irene Avaalaqiaq and others. Bouchard extends her contextualization of Tuu'luq through forays into the work of southern Canadian artists such as Joyce Wieland and Betty Goodwin, a strategy which will hopefully lead the way into more fruitful comparisons between northern and southern Canadian arts production.

Of the three exhibition catalogues under discussion, two have been published by the WAG, an institution which may have the largest collection of Inuit Art world-wide. It is also possibly the institution with the fastest growing collection, being home to significant donations by George Swinton, Ian Lindsay, Jerry Twomey, numerous smaller donations and an upcoming donation by the late Faye and Bert Settler. The WAG also has a significant history of publishing original research on Inuit Art in its exhibition catalogues, with the catalogue on collector Ian Lindsay an outstanding example of important new research and interpretation. (Wight 1990). Their most recent exhibition catalogue, *The Jerry Twomey Collection* (Wight 2004), is on the collector, donor and scientist Jerry Twomey. It documents the 3,700 piece collection of stone and bone sculptures that Twomey donated to the WAG. The catalogue is both a useful reference about the first two decades of carving in the Canadian Arctic and an interesting story about one man and his collecting activities. As a reference work, the catalogue includes large and small colour reproductions organized according to the three regions of artistic production, Nunavik (Arctic Quebec), Qikiqtaaluk (Baffin), and Kivalliq (Keewatin) where Twomey focused his collecting endeavours. The regions are further broken down by community and Wight has provided an overview and a bibliography for each region. It is primarily a striking visual reference and it includes a seven-page index of artists in the Twomey Collection. This last is indicative of the nature of Twomey's scientific and taxonomic zeal. It includes the artist's community, birth or death date, "disc number" (given to the Inuit by the Canadian government in

the 1950s and 1960s), number of works in the collection and family of origin. It is a mass of detail, a copy editor's potential nightmare and a resonance of the enormous amount of documentation and record keeping that once fuelled part of the motivation for the work of private and public sector agencies devoted to Inuit Art. Researchers of early carving will likely turn to the back pages first to peruse the reference to the Twomey collection. Inuit Art enthusiasts will appreciate the selection of illustrations of many important works.

Twomey's original habit was to classify the early sculptures according to artist's name, community and familial affiliation, and to obtain as much of the early material as was possible. Because of the confusion caused by the imposition of disc numbers and surnames, the transliterations of Inuktitut, and lack of standardization in spellings and namings—the bringing together of an artist's oeuvre across collections has been a time-consuming aspect of Inuit art historical scholarship. Because of Wight's careful research and Twomey's penchant for data, Wight has been able to make attributions of some previously unattributed carvings. The attention to factual detail has paid off here.

Wight explains that Jerry Twomey and the late Inuit art collector, artist, and art-historian George Swinton were friends and collectors together. It is no wonder that the Twomey catalogue is reminiscent of Swinton's seminal texts that introduced a huge number and range of early carvings available to the wider public (Swinton, 1972, 1992). Swinton and Twomey supported each other in their hobbies, habits and collections. There is some of this charming anecdotal material in Wight's essay, based on interviews with Twomey in 1997, 1999, 2002 and 2003. It makes Twomey's collection come alive. Wight's style is straightforward and without the psychoanalytic or psycho-biographical impulse to illuminate Twomey's motivations. That he was a scientist and a plant breeder and approached his collection with the same empirical approach is apparent. The catalogue is a handsome recollection of Wight's judicious and careful selection of Twomey's collection from the recent exhibition at the WAG that allows for a sustained appreciation of the spectacular objects which Twomey amassed. The mystery, the awe and the ingenuity of the works remains intact.

Another recent WAG catalogue reflects upon contemporary as opposed to historic developments. *Rankin Inlet Ceramics* (Wight 2003) is the only catalogue of the three to reflect upon the current status of art production in a community, with the recent revival of ceramics as an art form in Rankin Inlet, sustained by the private initiatives of Jim Shirley and the Matchbox Gallery. Unusually, the dealer, and former territorial arts and crafts development officer, has been given a voice within the catalogue. His story, "Vision and Dreams in Clay," evokes the themes encountered in northern arts development: arts revitalization, community based arts, teamwork, privatization following upon public support, and the boom and bust economy. Jim Shirley's true north narrative is descriptive. It is about the pragmatics of developing a viable shop and educational centre that envisions technical, economic and aesthetic success as outcomes. The ceramics from Rankin Inlet have always been a bit of an anomaly, up against the market's understanding that soapstone sculpture (even sometime Brazilian stone) was somehow a more authentic and traditional medium than clay. Wight

provides the history of the early development of ceramics in Rankin Inlet followed by biographies of the artists involved.

Although some artists working in ceramics in Rankin Inlet may not be familiar to the southern public, and given that group shows do present challenges for equal representation in the catalogue, I am not terribly fond of the emphasis here on the short biographical profile. Each of the seven artists is treated to a page or two of text, a photographic portrait, and an illustration of their works. The pages enumerate the features of one or two objects through excellent close-up photography, but having a series of discrete descriptions in a one-plus-one kind of narrative is reminiscent of the department store's invention. Short profiles can feel very superficial, particularly when the artist is something of a novice. Many catalogues on Inuit Art feel include photographs of the artists and emphasize biographic portraits. By contrast, in catalogues where the art is highly theorized, there are pains to distinguish the real from the representation, and the artist's life from a discussion of the work, without insisting on an image of the artist to then serve as the origin and explanation of all meaning. Yet, the otherness signified by the photographic portraiture illustrates the fantastic role that Inuit artists play as racialized, and different. Perhaps the emphasis on biographical data and portraiture has prevented a fuller integration of Inuit Art into the contemporary art mainstream.

Exhibition catalogues have a shadowy mimetic identity, with their opportunity to comment and develop on themes not present in the curatorial development or recapitulate the exhibition in its entirety by reproducing all the art objects. It may enhance the exhibition experience by providing for the reader the appropriate details and notations as to significance. The writing can be interpretive, historical, art critical, promotional and sometimes all these things at once. The catalogue is overdetermined not only by echoes of an event's long past, multiple motivations, and institutional traditions, but in the case of Inuit Art, by the weight and particularities of the post-war construction of "Inuit Art" as a subset of contemporary Canadian art constructed through various narrative emphases, excesses and omissions.

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– Oversimplification of a cause and effect relationship: (e.g., "Prohibition eliminated drunkenness.") Chapter or other part of an edited book. In a note, cite specific pages. In the bibliography, include the page range for the chapter or part.

Note. 1. Henry David Thoreau, "Walking," in *The Making of the American Essay*, ed. John D'Agata (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2016), 177–78. Shortened note. 2. Thoreau, "Walking," 182. Bibliography entry. Thoreau, Henry David. "Walking." In *The Making of the American Essay*, edited by John D'Agata, 167–95. Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2016. In some cases, you may want to cite the collection as a whole instead.

Note. 1. Michiko Kakutani, "Friendship Takes a Path That Diverges," review of *Swing Time*, by Zadie Smith, *New York Times*, November 7, 2016. Shortened note. 2. Kakutani, "Friendship." Please support our book restoration project by becoming a Forgotten Books member. Back. To read this book online, your options are: | Join Forgotten Books. 1,225,886 books Unlimited reading Dedicated support Small monthly fee. Click here to learn more.

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