Faces, Names, Words

Some Critical Countenances

Susan Gibson Garvey

They are all here,[1] the *important* people of the Canadian art world, ranged along 165 metres of brown wrapping paper: from Michael Snow to Carmen Lamanna, from Edythe Goodridge to Liz Magor. Here is Pierre Theberge, sandwiched full-face between Flora MacDonald and his own left and right profiles; there is Garry Neill Kennedy (who appears four times) sketched in trembling, schizoid lines, either shaking or laughing to himself. Diana Nemiroff is polished up like Princess Di, while Ron Shuebrook is deeply shaded into abstraction; Russell Keziere waves expressive hands to make a point, while Carol Moppett, staring at the viewer, shades her eyes as if dazzled by what she sees.

But — wait a minute — they are not all here . . . If there is Dennis Reid and John Bentley Mays, where are Philip Monk and Ian Carr-Harris? If Peggy Gale is included, why not Elke Town? If this is a litany of the critically significant now, what determined the selection? We know who is included and who is not without necessarily recognizing their features, because their names are conveniently scribbled beneath each oversize portrait. We are meant to know who is there. At this point, we remind ourselves that the exhibit is titled *Some Critical Countenances* (emphasis here on the *some*), and pause to ponder the audacity of the endeavour and the point of filleting the Canadian Art Establishment in this manner.

This exhibit is the outcome of a collaboration. Allan Harding MacKay, artist and gallery director, and Charlotte Townsend-Gault, critic and anthropologist, each approach the issue of 'official portraiture' from their own experience and erudition. In the process, they not only provide a historical record, a critical essay, and an exceptionally long piece of art, but also serve to illustrate their theses by personifying, in themselves, the collision of word and image — the continuing power-struggle between artistic and critical endeavour.

The Countenances

The phenomenological experience of the running portrait itself precedes the experience of the collaborative text. Physically and technically, this is an impressive work. MacKay is a gifted draftsman: facile, clever, seductive. Small reproductions do not do justice to the quality of his marks or the easy fluidity of his gestures. Close up, paint spatters and charcoal smears, casual dribbles and deftly worked tonal passages unfold in apparently effortless variation along the 1.5 metre-wide roll.

Each 'critical countenance' is someone whom MacKay met and photographed during numerous 'research' trips to Canada from his previous residence in Switzerland. The slides were then randomly chosen and their information translated onto the paper with as little interest in individual personalities as possible. There was to be no discernible hierarchy of images; no importance attached to the degree of 'finish' of individual portraits or to the number of times a person appeared. Apparently, the overall concern was that of style; the decision was one formal, aesthetic. In the production of this work, then, face followed face in a relatively haphazard fashion, and the scroll ended, after two years of prodigious labour, only because the arbitrary deadline for the exhibit had arrived.

Allan Harding MacKay, from **Some Critical Countenances** *(1987-89), mixed media on paper, 1.5 x 165 m, photo: Steve Zuerling; courtesy Art Gallery of Nova Scotia*

The result is all very arty, in a populist way. Visages full of shiny highlights or deep shadows, like those a camera flattens into indeterminacy, are followed by speedy contours and cut-out profiles. Sometimes a written text is scribbled out or an attempt at decoration has been reconsidered — MacKay's own self-consciousness compels him to ham it up visually when things get too earnest. The style alludes to movie-poster art and similar device-ridden aspects of commercial image-making, which should engender a certain cynicism in the viewer. Yet, strangely, these candid portraits have the feel of real people caught in the act of being, not posing: the expression of alert anxiety on Brenda Wallace's face, for example, or the softly pastel respect accorded to Doris Shadbolt's wrinkles.

MacKay (or, more properly, the slides from which he has drawn his information) has been flattering to some, unkind to others, but nearly all the portraits are enlivened by a genuine sense of humanity. The viewer's cynicism, when it occurs, relates more to the choice of subject matter than to its treatment.

MacKay has worked as a professional portrait-painter, and his other figurative works have almost always included some form of portraiture: himself, his friends growing up in PEI, or himself with Ferdinand Hodler, a Swiss modernist, in an ironic master-student relationship. As a curator, gallery director, and artist, MacKay is familiar with many aspects of the Canadian art world, so it is reasonable that his autobiographical figurative concerns should now include those who define and populate his chosen milieu. That he sees fit to include himself and his collaborating critic in the works seems entirely logical (even if she finds the representations of herself unflattering). But what is it, beyond a chronic compulsion to ham it up, that has driven MacKay, who has a full head of hair, to portray himself as a balding pedant with a blind eye?

It is less than ten years since Benjamin Buchloh contended that "the specter of derivativeness hovers over every contemporary attempt to resurrect figuration, representation, and traditional modes of production . . . because their attempt to reestablish forlorn aesthetic positions immediately situates them in historical secondariness."[2] For artists who choose to work in the figurative tradition, varieties of expressionism aside, the celebrated pluralism and seemingly limitless possibilities of post-modernism shrink to grudging dimensions. Before the Fall (i.e., before the subsumption of 'modernism' by 'post-'), permission to use representation was granted provided one was 'flat' and 'disinterested' (which often meant interposing the technology of the camera between artist and image, to abstract and neutralize), and new permission is conditional upon a demonstration that the project is really 'subversive' or 'deconstructive'.

For MacKay the dilemma may be this simple. On the one hand, he has a 'literal talent', nurtured at NSCAD in the pre-Kennedy era, and a conviction that much can be said using traditional means, even now. On the other hand, his experience as Director of NSCAD's Anna Leonowens Gallery during the early years of conceptualism, and his subsequent involvement in all aspects of the art world, not to mention his own intellectual skills as a wit and wordsmith, all conspire to engender self-doubt and second-guessing. As Townsend-Gault remarks, "When MacKay talks, it's as though he erases half of what he says." While more fluid in his visual work, he nevertheless employs some techniques equivalent to erasure.

MacKay may well be as unimpressed by Buchloh's assertions as he was by the repetitive strategies and limited means of NSCAD-style conceptualism. Even so, something has rubbed off, so to speak, because the very process he has chosen — a randomized set of images, presented according to a time-consuming formula, adhered to and completed to exhaustion — echoes, at least structurally, some conceptual art procedures. But, with MacKay, the work is not quite completed to exhaustion, and therefore it has not aspired to the level of exquisite boredom necessary to create the disengagement typical of such work. Even in his choice of methodology, MacKay demonstrates a kind of organic engagement (which explains why the portraits are moving, despite attempts at neutrality) and an opportunistic openness to revision and change.

While this openness is endearing, there is so much randomness, so much second-guessing and arbitrariness apparent that (collaborative essay aside) only one secure fact remains: the fact of a frieze of faces, all having some significance to Canadian art, ranged along the gallery walls above their scrawled names.

It is quite possible, says Townsend-Gault, that MacKay began this project "just for the hell of it", and it has since grown into this many-tentacled, organic, and convoluted commentary on the art world and on itself. Those accustomed to prizing 'intent' as a crucial constituent of artistic activity will be a little puzzled by MacKay's apparently cavalier attitude, wondering: did he co-opt his respected collaborator to lend critical dignity to an indulgence?

The Critic

Charlotte Townsend-Gault's collaborative essay is printed in the latter half of the accompanying booklet, the first half of which is a reproduction of the entire art work. Responses to the work itself are moderated considerably upon reading the text, and it is interesting, if not crucial, to realize that the piece is scheduled to be exhibited only once, at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia. What will endure, long after the chalk and oil marks on brown paper have crumbled into decay, is the little booklet, in which visuals and text are nearly perfectly balanced. A collaboration indeed — and more than this, since, in the final analysis, the critic's text will determine how the experience of the art work will be reconstructed from the reproduction. It, as it is claimed, one motivation for this visual embodiment of critical countenances is to reverse the critic's power over the image through the written word by 'capturing' the critic's image itself, then, ironically, time itself will turn the tables on the artist, for it is a critic, in this case, who will have the last word.

If MacKay is skillful in his particular field, so Townsend-Gault is erudite in hers. She draws on a personal source of fascination and study to lend depth to her analysis of *Some Critical Countenances*; namely, her research into official British portraiture. The conditions of official portraiture, she says, are: the use of prestigious, durable materials (oil on canvas); some display of the artist's labour as opposed to originality; a pose that creates social distance, and a presentation (gilt frame, brass plaque) that indicates it is the sitter's office rather that their individuality that is of importance. Given these conventions, it is easy to see why Townsend-Gault calls the running portrait "deconstructive". In working in "a populist style on a support that clearly will not stand the test of time", MacKay has transgressed the rules of this peculiar, if enduring art form. In so doing, she contends, he has created a work which critically examines — deconstructs — the authority of its subjects.

These people — artists, writers, curators, collectors, administrators, and combinations of these roles, are critical, she says, because: "what they countenance is what counts as art in this country today. 'Critical' should be glossed as 'authoritative', 'legitimising'." Critical, "critical", not to mention "countenance", can be glossed in many other ways, almost all of them relevant to the issue at hand. But here the operative word is 'authority' — how it is constituted and questioned in this collaboration. She notes that words confer authority in the realm of criticism, and that MacKay's own ability to capture likenesses empowers him to re-present the critical countenances and to deconstruct the authority invested in them. He does this by co-opting and subverting the authority of "a certain set of conventions for representing the human face".

It becomes clear why Townsend-Gault is cast in the role of collaborator rather than mere commentator, for much of the scholarly polemics and subtler insights of the text are 'not immediately apparent in the work. While her proposal that MacKay's running portrait is deconstructive seems straightforward enough, her use of Jacques Derrida's ideas regarding an original and its copy enlarges the discussion well beyond the visual evidence. Moreover, while both artist and critic acknowledge that the work evolved from rather different beginnings, and that changes were often fortuitous and circumstantial, the deconstructive aspects are not so much willed by the artist as inferred by the collaborating critic. After reading the essay, the extent to which the art work itself has been re-contsructed in terms of the critic's text may well be the point where Derrida takes on relevance.

On a more straightforward level, Townsend-Gault draws our attention to the manner in which the non-hierarchical arrangement of faces demonstrates that critical authority in Canada is collectively, rather than individually, produced. The relative absence of individual critical 'giants', and our preference for boards, juries, coalitions, and collective decision-making are qualitative facts of critical authority that may be unique. The very format of MacKay's running portrait acts as a metaphor for this collective authority, even if it has engendered the sardonic comment (from more than one observer) that what it really represents is 'Oscar Night at the Canada Council'.

The Receptors

With all due respect to Derrida, there is a gap between how the visual 'text' of this exhibit is intended and how it is being read: between its presentation and its reception.

As most so-called 'primitives' are aware, stealing someone's image confers a special kind of power on the thief. If "the subject of this work is authority," then it manifests itself in effect as power, not only in the positive sense of empowerment, but also negatively, as intimidation or presumption. It must be acknowledged that it is difficult to draw directly on one's intimate involvement with the art world without being accused of opportunism. Yet there is a sense in which MacKay may be guilty of 'insider trading' where the currency is not knowledge but who you know.

It is interesting that the exhibit, probably for quite innocent reasons, is to be shown only in Nova Scotia, and is thus subject to typical regional paranoia about who one knows. Moreover, it is being shown in a gallery not particularly famous for its critical zeal. (Is MacKay cocking a snook at NSCAD here — using figuration, in a traditionally-oriented gallery, to thumb his nose at the ghost of conceptualism?) Attending the exhibit, I found one artist friend condescending with an air of embarrassed desperation, "I don't know *half* of these people," as if, perhaps because of the written names, it were one's *duty* to know them. Were the exhibit to be mounted in central Canada, one imagines it would engender quite a different crisis of self-image.

Is MacKay, by being only partially inclusive, actually being exclusive? It is hard to see how he could be other than exclusive, unless he is to devote his entire life to exhaustive documentation, which, while an interesting proposition, is not really the point of the piece. MacKay makes no apology for his selection; it is, he insists, a slice of his own personal history, since these faces are part of his chosen milieu which has shaped and defined *him*. But, of course, he recognizes that his subjects are all, to some degree, public figures, thus rendering the work an 'official portrait' (however ephemeral the materials) and thus ensuring, at the very least, a measure of critical attention. That both artist and critic are members of the community which their collaborative efforts dissect and which gives them the authority to conduct their project, and that the project itself is to be critically reviewed in journals whose authority is conferred by the writing, editing, and reading of many individuals whose faces appear in the work under review, lends an additional, possibly incestuous, layer to an already layered phenomenon. If this is self-serving, MacKay would probably reply that representing those who may be classed within the power-politics of the art establishment inevitably involves one in the same game. To paraphrase Townsend-Gault, there is a point where we all end up in our own line of fire.

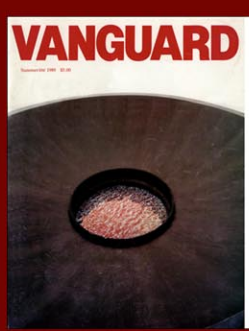
It must be noted, however, that there is a whole class of 'critical countenances' who are conspicuous by their absence: those practitioners and writers who may be classed as 'alternative' — the marginalized, the guerillas, certain feminists, some gays, and all those who, by refusing to participate at all in the games of the art establishment, criticize the critics in quite a different manner from MacKay. Naturally, they do not appear in this parade of relatively centrist, relatively *male* identities. For, despite Townsend-Gault's assertion that "few can resist an invitation to be included in a roster of the critically important," these are the very souls who, in the unlikely event of being asked, might actually find the conscience to refuse. Even some of those who did participate might feel a twinge of anxiety at what their inclusion truly countenances.

In effect, it is the names written beneath each portrait which seek a spurious validation. The images in themselves are quite sufficient to support the textural thesis and embody the deconstructive project. Indeed, the work would be considerably strengthened by the removal of the names, since the authority of the image itself would then stand without the prop of the word. Townsend-Gault's instinct to have MacKay erase the written snatches of conversation from the work proves to be accurate. She perceives the dialectic between written word and graphic image to be the conceptual strength of this piece. In fact, her scholarly prose lends critical validation to a clever subversion of the Canadian art establishment by an *enfant terrible* who happens to be one of its own.

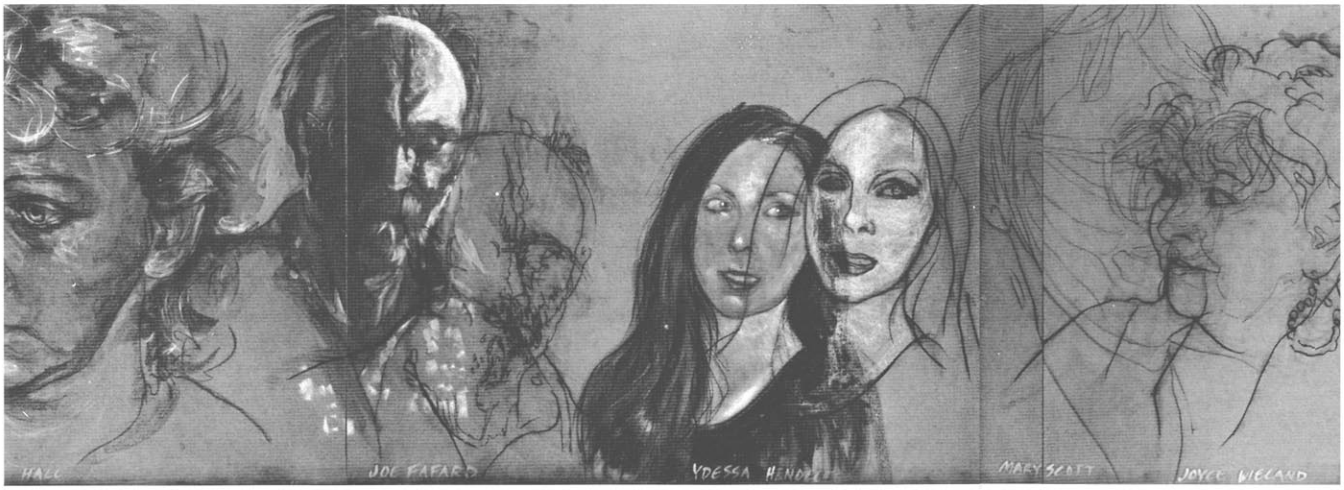
Notes

1. Allan Harding MacKay and Charlotte Townsend-Gault, Some Critical Countenances, Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, February 10 to April 2. All phrases and sentences appearing in double quotation marks are taken from the catalogue text by Charlotte Townsend-Gault (Halifax: Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, 1989).
2. Benjamin Buchloh, "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression", as found in *Modernism and Modernity*, eds. Buchloh, Guilbaut and Solkin (Halifax: the NSCAD Press, 1983).

Susan Gibson Garvey is an artist and writer living in Canning, NS



FACES, NAMES, WORDS



SOME CRITICAL COUNTENANCES

By Susan Gibson Garvey

They are all here,[1] the *important* people of the Canadian art world, ranged along 165 metres of brown wrapping paper: from Michael Snow to Carmen Lamanna, from Edythe Goodridge to Liz Magor. Here is Pierre Théberge, sandwiched full-face between Flora MacDonald and his own left and right profiles; there is Garry Neill Kennedy (who appears four times) sketched in trembling, schizoid lines, either shaking or laughing to himself. Diana Nemiroff is polished up like Princess Di, while Ron Shuebrook is deeply shaded into abstraction; Russell Keziere waves expressive hands to make a point, while Carol Moppett, staring at the viewer, shades her eyes as if dazzled by what she sees.

But - wait a minute - they are not all here. If there is Dennis Reid and John Bentley Mays, where are Philip Monk and Ian Carr-Harris? If Peggy Gale is included, why not Elke Town? If this is a litany of the critically significant now, what determined the selection? We know who is included and who is not without necessarily recognizing their features, because their names are conveniently scribbled beneath each oversize \portrait. We are meant to know who is there. At this point, we remind ourselves that the exhibit is titled *Some Critical Countenances* (emphasis here on the some), and pause to ponder the audacity of the endeavour and the point of filleting the Canadian Art Establishment in this manner.

This exhibit is the outcome of a collaboration. Allan Harding MacKay, artist and gallery director, and Charlotte Townsend-Gault, critic and anthropologist, each approach the issue of 'official portraiture' from their own experience and erudition. In the process, they not only provide a historical record, a critical essay, and an exceptionally long piece of art, but also serve to illustrate their theses by personifying, in themselves, the collision of word and image - the continuing power-struggle between artistic and critical endeavour.

The Countenances

The phenomenological experience of the running portrait itself precedes the experience of the collaborative text. Physically and technically, this is an impressive work. MacKay is a gifted draftsman: facile, clever, seductive. Small reproductions do not do justice to the quality of his marks or the easy fluidity of his gestures. Close up, paint spatters and charcoal smears, casual dribbles and deftly worked tonal passages unfold in apparently effortless variation along the 1.5 metre-wide roll.

Each 'critical countenance' is someone whom MacKay met and photographed during numerous 'research' trips to Canada from his previous residence in Switzerland. The slides were then randomly chosen and their information translated onto the paper with as little interest in individual personalities as possible. There was to be no discernible hierarchy of images; no importance attached to the degree of 'finish' of individual portraits or to the number of times a person appeared. Apparently, the overall concern was that of style; the decisions were formal, aesthetic. In the production of this work, then, face followed face in a relatively haphazard fashion, and the scroll ended, after two years of prodigious labour, only because the arbitrary deadline for the exhibit had arrived.

The result is all very arty, in a populist way. Visages full of shiny highlights or deep shadows, like those a camera flattens into indeterminacy, are followed by speedy contours and cut-out profiles. Sometimes a written text is scrubbed out or an attempt at decoration has been reconsidered - MacKay's own self-consciousness compels him to ham it up visually when things get too earnest. The style alludes to movie-poster art and similar device-ridden aspects of commercial image-making, which should engender a certain cynicism in the viewer. Yet, strangely, these candid portraits have the feel of real people caught in the act of being, not posing: the expression of alert anxiety on Brenda Wallace's face, for example, or the softly pastel respect accorded to Doris Shadbolt's wrinkles. MacKay (or, more properly, the slides from which he has drawn his information) has been flattering to some, unkind to others, but nearly all the portraits are enlivened by a genuine sense of humanity. The viewer's cynicism, when it occurs, relates more to the choice of subject matter than to its treatment.

MacKay has worked as a professional portrait-painter, and his other figurative works have almost always included some form of portraiture: himself, his friends growing up in PEI, or himself with Ferdinand Hodler, a Swiss modernist, in an ironic master-student relationship. As a curator, gallery director, and artist, MacKay is familiar with many aspects of the Canadian art world, so it is reasonable that his autobiographical figurative concerns should now include those who define and populate his chosen milieu. That he sees fit to include himself and his collaborating critic in the works seems entirely logical (even if she finds the representations of herself unflattering). But what is it, beyond a chronic compulsion to ham it up, that has driven MacKay, who has a full head of hair, to portray himself as a balding pedant with a blind eye?

It is less than ten years since Benjamin Buchloh contended that "the specter of derivativeness hovers over every contemporary attempt to resurrect figuration, representation, and traditional modes of production . . . because their attempt to reestablish forlorn aesthetic positions immediately situates them in historical secondariness." For artists who choose to work in the figurative tradition, varieties of expressionism aside, the celebrated pluralism and seemingly limitless possibilities of post-modernism shrink to grudging dimensions Before the Fall (i.e., before the subsumption of 'modernism' by 'post-'), permission to use representation was granted pro vided one was 'flat' and 'disinterested' (which often mean interposing the technology of the camera between artist and image, to abstract and neutralize), and now permission is conditional upon a demonstration that the project is really 'subversive' or 'deconstructive'.

For MacKay the dilemma may be this simple. On the one hand, he has a 'literal talent', nurtured at NSCAD in the pre-Kennedy era, and a conviction that much can be said using traditional means, even now. On the other hand, his experience as Director of NSCAD's Anna Leonowens Gallery during the early years of conceptualism, and his subsequent involvement in all aspects of the art world, not to mention his own intellectual skills as a wit and wordsmith, all conspire to engender self-doubt and second-guessing. As Townsend-Gault remarks, "When MacKay talks, it's as though he erases half of what he says." While more fluid in his visual work, he nevertheless employs some techniques equivalent to erasure.

MacKay may well be as unimpressed by Buchloh's assertions as he was by the repetitive strategies and limited means of NSCAD-style conceptualism. Even so, something has rubbed off, so to speak, because the very process he has chosen - a randomized set of images, presented according to a time consuming formula, adhered to and completed to exhaustion - echoes, at least structurally, some conceptual art procedures. But, with MacKay, the work is not quite completed to exhaustion, and therefore it has not aspired to the level of exquisite boredom necessary to create the disengagement typical of such work. Even in his choice of methodology, MacKay demonstrates a kind of organic engagement (which explains why the portraits are moving, despite attempts at neutrality) and an opportunistic openness to revision and change.

While this openness is endearing, there is so much randomness, so much second-guessing and arbitrariness apparent that (collaborative essay aside) only one secure fact remains: the fact of a frieze of faces, all having some significance to Canadian art, ranged along the gallery walls above their scrawled names.

It is quite possible, says Townsend-Gault, that MacKay began this project "just for the hell of it", and it has since grown into this many-tentacled, organic, and convoluted commentary on the art world and on itself. Those accustomed to prizing 'intent' as a crucial constituent of artistic activity will be a little puzzled by MacKay's apparently cavalier attitude, wondering: did he co-opt his respected collaborator to lend critical dignity to an indulgence?

The Critic

Charlotte Townsend-Gault's collaborative essay is printed in the latter half of the accompanying booklet, the first half of which is a reproduction of the entire art work. Responses to the work itself are moderated considerably upon reading the text, and it is interesting, if not crucial, to realize that the piece is scheduled to be exhibited only once, at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia. What will endure, long after the chalk and oil marks on brown paper have crumbled into decay, is the little booklet, in which visuals and text are nearly perfectly balanced. A collaboration indeed - and more than this, since, in the final analysis, the critic's text will determine how the

experience of the art work will be reconstructed from the reproduction. If, as it is claimed, one motivation for this visual embodiment of critical countenances is to reverse the critic's power over the image through the written word by 'capturing' the critic's image itself, then, ironically, time itself will turn the tables on the artist, for it is a critic, in this case, who will have the last word.

If MacKay is skillful in his particular field, so Townsend-Gault is erudite in hers. She draws on a personal source of fascination and study to lend depth to her analysis of *Some Critical Countenances*; namely, her research into official British portraiture. The conditions of official portraiture, she says, are: the use of prestigious, durable materials (oil on canvas); some display of the artist's labour as opposed to originality; a pose that creates social distance, and a presentation (gilt frame, brass plaque) that indicates it is the sitter's office rather that their individuality that is of importance. Given these conventions, it is easy to see why Townsend-Gault calls the running portrait "deconstructive". In working in "a populist style on a support that clearly will not stand the test of time", MacKay has transgressed the rules of this peculiar, if enduring art form. In so doing, she contends, he has created a work which critically examines - deconstructs - the authority of its subjects.

These people - artists, writers, curators, collectors, administrators, and combinations of these roles, are critical, she says, because: "what they countenance is what counts as art in this country today. 'Critical' should be glossed as 'authoritative', 'legitimising'." Of course, "critical", not to mention "coun tenance", can be glossed in many other ways, almost all of them relevant to the issue at hand. But here the operative word is 'authority' - how it is constituted and questioned in this collaboration. She notes that words confer authority in the realm of criticism, and that MacKay's own ability to capture likenesses empowers him to re-present the critical countenances and to deconstruct the authority invested in them. He does this by co-opting and subverting the authority of "a certain set of conventions for representing the human face".

It becomes clear why Townsend-Gault is cast in the role of collaborator rather than mere commentator, for much of the scholarly polemics and subtler insights of the text are not immediately apparent in the work. While her proposal that MacKay's running portrait is deconstructive seems straightforward enough, her use of Jacques Derrida's ideas regarding an original and its copy enlarges the discussion well beyond the visual evidence. Moreover, while both artist and critic acknowledge that the work evolved from rather different beginnings, and that changes were often fortuitous and circumstantial, the deconstructive aspects are not so much willed by the artist as inferred by the collaborating critic. After reading the essay, the extent to which the artwork itself has been re-constructed in terms of the critic's text may well be the point where Derrida takes on relevance.

On a more straightforward level, Townsend-Gault draws our attention to the manner in which the non-hierarchical arrangement of faces demonstrates that critical authority in Canada is collectively, rather than individually, produced. The relative absence of individual critical 'giants', and our preference for boards, juries, coalitions, and collective decision-making are qualitative facts of critical authority that may be unique. The very format of MacKay's running portrait acts as a metaphor for this collective authority, even if it has engendered the sardonic comment (from more than one observer) that what it really represents is 'Oscar Night at the Canada Council'.

The Receptors

With all due respect to Derrida, there is a gap between how the visual 'text' of this exhibit is intended and how it is being read; between its presentation and its reception.

As most so-called 'primitives' are aware, stealing someone's image confers a special kind of power on the thief. If "the subject of this work is authority," then it manifests itself in effect as power, not only in the positive sense of empowerment, but also negatively, as intimidation or presumption. It must be acknowledged that it is difficult to draw directly on one's intimate involvement with the art world without being accused of opportunism. Yet there is a sense in which MacKay may be guilty of 'insider trading' where the currency is not knowledge but who you know.

It is interesting that the exhibit, probably for quite innocent reasons, is to be shown only in Nova Scotia, and is thus subject to typical regional paranoia about who one knows. Moreover, it is being shown in a gallery not particularly famous for its critical zeal. (Is MacKay cocking a Snook at NSCAD here - using figuration, in a traditionally-oriented gallery, to thumb his nose at the ghost of conceptualism?) Attending the exhibit, I found one artist friend confessing with an air of embarrassed desperation, "I don't know *half* of these people," as if, perhaps because of the written names, it were one's *duty* to know them. Were the exhibit to be mounted in central Canada, one imagines it would engender quite a different crisis of self-image.

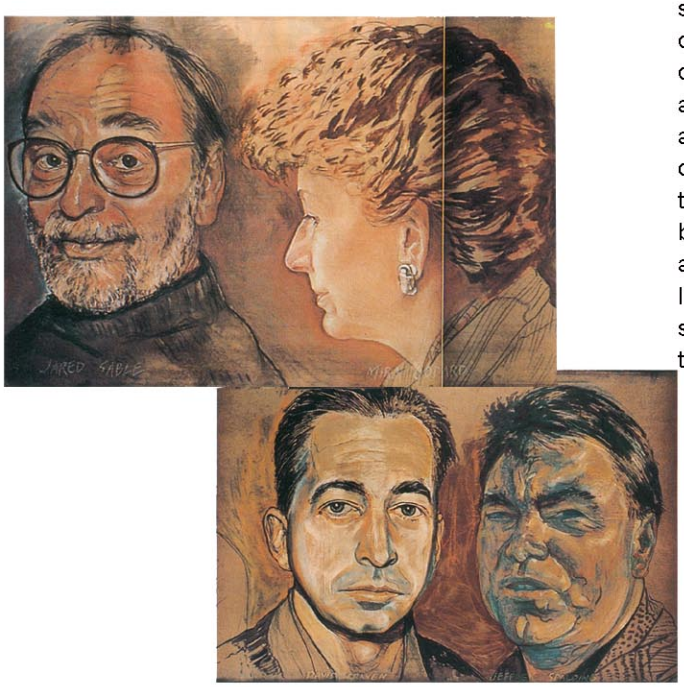
Is MacKay, by being only partially inclusive, actually being exclusive? It is hard to see how he could be other than exclusive, unless he is to devote his entire life to exhaustive documentation, which, while an interesting proposition, is not really the point of the piece. MacKay makes no apology for his selection; it is, he insists, a slice of his own personal history, since these faces are part of his chosen milieu which has shaped and defined him. But, of course, he recognizes that his subjects are all, to some degree, public figures, thus rendering the work an 'official portrait' (however ephemeral the materials) and thus ensuring, at the very least, a measure of critical attention.

That both artist and critic are members of the community which their collaborative efforts dissect and which gives them the authority to conduct their project, and that the project itself is to be critically reviewed in journals whose authority is conferred by the writing, editing, and reading of many individuals whose faces appear in the work under review, lends an additional, possibly incestuous, layer to an already layered phenomenon. If this is self-serving, MacKay would probably reply that representing those who may be classed within the power-politics of the art establishment inevitably involves one in the same game. To paraphrase Townsend-Gault, there is a point where we all end up in our own line of fire.

It must be noted, however, that there is a whole class of 'critical countenances' who are conspicuous by their absence: those practitioners and writers who may be classed as 'alternative' - the marginalized, the guerillas, certain feminists, some gays, and all those who, by refusing to participate at all in the games of the art establishment, criticize the critics in quite a different manner from MacKay. Naturally, they do not appear in this parade of relatively centrist, relatively WASP identities. For, despite Townsend-Gault's assertion that "few can resist an invitation to be included in a roster of the critically important," these are the very souls who, in the unlikely event of being asked, might actually find the conscience to refuse. Even some of those who did participate might feel a twinge of anxiety at what their inclusion truly countenances.

In effect, it is the names written beneath each portrait which seek a spurious validation. The images in themselves are quite sufficient to support the textural thesis and embody the deconstructive project. Indeed, the work would be considerably strengthened by the removal of the names, since the authority of the image itself would then stand without the prop of the word. Townsend-Gault's instinct to have MacKay erase the written snatches of conversation from the work proves to be accurate. She perceives the dialectic between written word and graphic image to be the conceptual strength of this piece. In fact, her scholarly prose lends critical validation to a clever subversion of the Canadian art establishment by an enfant terrible who happens to be one of its own.

Susan Gibson Garvey is an
artist and writer living in Canning, NS



Allan Harding MacKay, from *Some Critical Countenances* (1987-89), mixed media on paper, 1.5 x 165 m,