
TECHNOLOGY AND EMANCIPATORY ART: THE MANITOBA VISION

Arthur Kroker and Kenneth J. Hughes

The Artist as Prophet

In *Understanding Media*, Marshall McLuhan said that the age of electric technology is a period of intense anxiety and bewilderment.¹

It was McLuhan's special insight that in the era of electric technology artists have a very vital role to play. "Art is precise advance knowledge of how to cope with the psychic and social consequences of the next technology".² For McLuhan, artists can no longer loosely be spoken of as being ahead of their time for the simple reason that "our technology is, also, ahead of its time".³ The artistic imagination provides an early indication, sometimes "decades in advance" of coming technological changes and their likely impact on society. To the extent that the artist "possesses the means of anticipating and avoiding the consequences of technological trauma",⁴ then the artistic imagination is also prophetic. As the individual of "integral awareness", the artist is most deeply embedded in the reality of the times, and most receptive, at any moment, to grasping at a deep level the implications of new technologies.

If McLuhan is correct in his assumption of the artist as the "prophet" of technological experience, then there is a desperate, and very practical, need to look at Canadian art for clues to human survival. As it happens, we are fortunate in this regard in Canada, for there exists in contemporary Canadian art a powerful, coherent, and unique discourse on technology. Indeed, it might even be suggested that in the works of four contemporary Manitoba artists — Esther Warkov, Tony Tascona, Don Proch and Ivan Eyre — there has developed a radically new exploration of the dialectic of technol-

ogy and society. Taken collectively — though they are not a “school” — these artists have produced a visual discourse on technology which has few equals in contemporary art. For they have done, in fact, that which is most difficult. They have infused the question of technology with an *historical* concern (the remembrance of the prairie past); with a *moral* concern (the exploration of a democratic and critical approach to technology); and with an *aesthetic* concern (the creative use of new technologies in expanding the artistic imagination). Thus the extent that we grasp the urgency of a more creative approach to the technological experience as a vital necessity for Canada’s survival, these prairie artists emerge as guides, indeed prophets, in the exploration of a new “national consciousness”. They confront us with a new “vision” of Canadian society. And what’s more: their artistic productions demonstrate that in the age of postmodernism *the most local is also the most cosmopolitan*.

These Manitoba artists have not, of course, developed a monolithic understanding of technology. On the contrary, their work is significant precisely because it is internally divergent and heterogeneous. Their use of the artistic imagination represents, in fact, perhaps all of the major positions which we can possibly assume on the question of technology. Thus, Esther Warkov brings to a new height of visual eloquence the perspective of *technological dependency*. The work of Tony Tascona is, in an important sense, a reverse, but parallel, image of Warkov’s. Tascona represents, and this brilliantly, the perspective of *technological humanism* in the artistic imagination. And, midway between these poles of dependency and humanism, we discover the ironic, and yet searing, visions of technology which inform the works of Don Proch and Ivan Eyre. To study the artistic productions of Proch and Eyre takes us on a journey of discovery which leads us through all of the variations possible on the theme of *technological realism*. To Warkov’s noble dirge for the victims of technological society and to Tascona’s creative exploration of the inner language of science and technology, Proch and Eyre add the impressive attempt to create a new mediation between past and future, between technology and environment.

Lament, utopia and realism: the dominant themes of these Manitoba artists as they confront, on our behalf, the new world of technology. But in the end, it does not matter so much that their artistic imaginations serve the task of prophecy, for they have another crucial ethical enterprise on the agenda. They take seriously the social obligation to be agents of historical remembrance. The dynamic meeting in their works of a future-oriented prophecy and of a constant invocation of Canadian historical traditions makes their artistic productions the fusion-point for a new national consciousness. These artists teach us two vital lessons: first, there is a sharp division between the human use of technology and the imposition of a

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technocracy which carries within it all of the signs of a living death; secondly, the creation of an ethically-informed technology would involve the development of an active relationship among morality, technique, and environment. As we study therefore the discourse on technology in Manitoba art we embark on nothing less than a radical experiment in learning: we learn how to *rethink* anew the meaning of the technological experience.

Technology and Dependency

The Canadian philosopher, George Grant, posed the fateful question of how to live critically inside the technological dynamo. In *Technology and Empire*, he inquires: If "technique is ourselves", if we cannot recover a language of "the good" by which to measure the deprivations of technological society, then must it be the tragic Canadian fate merely to "celebrate or stand in silence" before the relentless power of technology? He responds with a solitary hint about a possible escape-route from the prison-house of technology and dependency: we can live critically in the technological dynamo only by "listening intently for the intimations of deprival".⁵

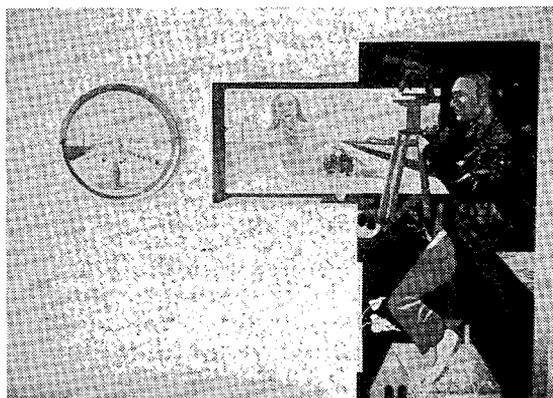
Esther Warkov approaches the *critical* ideal of neither remaining silent in the face of technology nor of celebrating the coming to be of technique. She listens "intently for the intimations of deprival". In fact, her artistic imagination becomes precious precisely because it begins the recovery of a language of the human good against which to measure the deprivals of technological society. Warkov attempts to do the impossible: running against the tide of the "technological dynamo" which works by speed-up and constant acceleration, Warkov reverses the process by insisting on the necessity, and, indeed, dignity of the recovery of the historical imagination. She reminds us of who we are and what we are rushing to become, and she does this through the almost "theatrical" device of arraignment of the victims of post-modernity — demolished cultures, dead families and children, suppressed civilisations — against the claims to freedom of the present. In a society which functions by forgetfulness, she holds up the mirror of the past as a prophetic sign of the future.

All of Warkov's painting, ranging through the *Rabbi Series*, the *Scream Series*, and the *Camera Series*, have a measured and haunting sense through which the active remembrance of victims of the dynamo recover an intimation of the losses suffered by the inhabitants of the contemporary century. Her artistic imagination emerges as that of the sympathetic, critical historian of the post-modern fate for each of the works reveals an explicit and painful probing of the human wreckage left in the wake of the will to technological mastery of the present. In a recent interview, Warkov remarked: "I think from an early age, I was attracted to old photographs.

I've always been fascinated with the past".⁶ But this fascination with the past is specific, always directed to the site (and sight) of a fundamental human loss. In a way unfamiliar to the contemporary eye her artistic imagination produces a visual lament for the excluded, the lost, in the meeting of technology and empire. For example, Warkov admits that she often builds her paintings around photographs. *Surveyor in the City of Lost Dreams*, her brilliant depiction of the deep division between industrialism and sensual experience, began with the photograph of an engineer. *Passing Through* she constructed around a photograph of the anonymous figure of the driver (the *camera obscura*) who witnesses the genocide of civilisation. *Rolling Home to Moses*, her haunting and complex "figurative" presentation of freedom and domination, developed out of a photograph taken by Margaret Bourke-White at the opening of the death-camp of Auschwitz.⁷

To study Warkov's paintings means to be in the presence of a prolonged *keaning*: a meditation in the form of a lament for the *exclusions* of the contemporary century, the absence of which speaks directly to the impoverishment of modern times. Always Warkov pulls us painfully to the site of the exterminated. Her paintings become, in fact, a recitative of human deprivation, for her visual imagination works at the threshold of menace and terror. Everywhere in her paintings we feel the presence of a nameless, silent and almost decentered power. Images are violently detached from one another; all is a matter of fragmentation, dispersion, and shattered possibilities. Her figurative art, in fact, produces the cumulative effect of a silent scream. Warkov notes about her projects: "My intent has always been to create an art that had a soul"⁸ Why? Perhaps because she approaches the model of what the art critic, John Berger, has described as the "primitive artist"⁹: the prophetic, artistic imagination which fuses in art objects the collective unconscious, the daily stress of life.

One critical event provides Warkov in an unforgiving way, with a



A: Warkov, *Surveyor in the City of Lost Dreams*

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privileged access to understanding post-modernity: the holocaust. She says of her ethnic Jewish self: "There's always that sense of doom or terror".¹⁰ Or further: "I think for a Jewish person there is always that sense that you are a traveller in the night".¹¹ We mention this only because Warkov seems to be that rarity among contemporary artists: a visionary who has managed to step outside the all-encompassing horizon of the technological dynamo, one who has proceeded to strip its logic down to a minimal, fundamental struggle between exterminism and life. She has the artistic imagination of the survivor. Warkov seems to have a special insight into the different ways that the power of exterminism works: the power of the surveyor (*Surveyor of the City of Lost Dreams*) to annihilate nature through the imposition of an industrial landscape; the brutal power of the soldier (*Passing Through*) evident in the vivid red blood of violence; the power of Christian culture in *Stonewallian's Lament* both to screen off the spontaneity of the self, and to silence the sensuousness of nature. The logic of post-modernity, understood as the technological will to mastery, appears in quite different ways in her painting: sometimes as a "gun" (*Passing Through*), as a "cart" (*Rolling Home to Moses*), as an urban landscape (*Our Lady of the Jewelled Rose*). But all of these are variations on a common central theme: the general struggle of technique against life, rationality against sensuality, violence against culture. In fact, we might say that Warkov poses the key question as to whether or not technological society becomes the equivalent of the power of death over life.

Warkov's lament goes beyond an historical remembrance of the loss of precious aspects of experience. Its haunting-effect, what makes it a fascinating indictment and *challenge*, is that it describes in detail the specific *method* of exclusion. If she points to the need to overcome historical forgetfulness, then she also describes the geography of this amnesia. Each of her paintings depicts, in almost clinical detail, the origin and consequences of historical forgetfulness in technological society.

For example, of *Surveyor of the City of Lost Dreams*, Warkov writes:

A surveyor who is part bird, part man, looks at the city where his secret love applies her lipstick. She is lost in daydreams of her new love and is unaware that she is being watched by the birdman. He is ready to fly to her, aided by the tiny wings on his ankles. We have all been surveyors in the city of lost dreams.

This painting offers, perhaps, as vivid and complex a description as could be found of how alienation appears now as seduction in technological society. Warkov can say that we have all lived as "surveyors in the city of lost dreams" because technique does not exist outside of us: in a lifeless,

machine-world which we can hold separate from our deepest sense of self. For her, "technique is ourselves". Thus, the ideology of consumer culture, the actual text of *Surveyor of the City of Lost Dreams*, also speaks the language of sexual desire, and yes, of love. The terrible secret of technological society, in fact, its deepest deprivation, may be that as a mediation of human relationships in the modern century, it becomes utterly invisible to its participants. Technique as *screen* separates us from nature, from others, from ourselves. It leaves in its way a collage of fragmented identities. This may be why, perhaps, Warkov structures the canvas of *City of Lost Dreams* in the form of a movie camera or projector. She begins by intimating that consumer culture privileges the image over the actual bodily self, over nature. In this imposition (through the *geometric* vision of the surveyor) of alienated and fragmented identities, everything holds together through the language of seduction. It is also the human identity which is wagered in this encounter with technique.

Surveyor in the City of Lost Dreams begins, in fact, with a double-seduction. We meet, first, a visual-verbal sexual pun which connects the watching man with a cockerel. This fragment of a man watches a fragment of a naked woman. The sheer physical fragmentation of the painting thus becomes part of a larger spiritual fragmentation which emerges as the theme of the work. The birdman and his secret love relate only through voyeurism for the naked woman serves as a perfect image of a commodity in the market-place. She represents the "come-on" of the technological apparatus in the background of the painting. However, the reduction of the secret love to an "object" in consumer culture has another side. The opposite of pure materialism is represented by the spiritual *Venus Celestis* figure in the sky. As with the divided identity of the woman, so with the man. We see his alienated "other" spiritual self on the bottom left square canvas. The head-dress on the male symbolises the spiritual even as it suggests the original unalienated culture of native, Indian people. But the alienated surveyor directs his gaze to his "materialistic" love with the levelled telescope, while his theodolite-cum-telescope points upwards to the heavens unused. This material-spiritual difference of focus conveys the sense of deprivation at the centre of Warkov's work. We find ourselves in the presence of a rich, figurative art which contrasts at the very different levels the deep divisions in technological society between culture and nature: industrial landscape and flowers; the geometrical shape of the urban landscape and the organic horizon of the sky; the lunar image and the *Venus Naturalis*; even the organic opposition between the square canvas (a symbol of closure) and the circular canvas (symbol of organic growth).

The nature-culture conflict reveals the surveyor ("we have all been surveyors ...") to be alienated from his own human nature. Meanwhile,

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predominance of the geometrical forms of the twentieth-century urban factory landscape dominate the land or nature, to reveal the larger social dimensions of his alienation. Putting the scene in historical perspective, Warkov makes the surveyor's foot hang above a simple nineteenth-century building which exists in a balanced relationship with nature. The work in this way tells us that we have been overwhelmed by the materialism (consumer culture) of technological society. The wings on the heel of the surveyor turn him into the Hermes of Greek and the Mercury of Roman mythology. But both gods here become solidly associated with merchant society, Hermes being also the "the messenger of the gods and escort of the dead". The "City" (a place of trade) joins with the "Lost Dreams" (dead dreams of what might have been) of the title.

To say, however, that Warkov paints the "deprivals" of technology does not mean that her artistic imagination dissolves into a relentless fatalism. Quite the contrary. The total effect of her paintings point in the direction not of the pessimistic but the realistic. Warkov seems to say in her work that the horror of technological society must be studied so as to find a way of releasing future beauty. Thus, what is at work in her paintings is a constant struggle between an imposed static, technological order and a surging new, more organic reconciliation of nature and culture. The ideal of listening for the "intimations of deprivation" perhaps also produces a way of founding the possibility of a new Eden on precisely that which has been silenced. The painter of human deprivation has thus discovered a lost good, not outside technological society, but within it. If we have become the "commandments" of technology, then Warkov tells us that the recovery of meaning begins with the emancipation of those portions of the "self", and of nature, which have been *screened-off* by technique.

The signs of human regeneration appear everywhere in Warkov's paintings. The pregnant woman in *Passing Through* exists as the symbol of new life, even in the midst of the exterminism of the present. In *Rolling Home to Moses*, we cannot miss the powerful symbol of the "stag" of freedom (followed by the peasant's gaze). In *Ice Dream* and in *Our Lady of the Jewelled Rose*, Warkov employs a common, theatrical device: the separation of the canvas into a square unit to the right and a smaller, circular unit to the left. In both paintings, the square canvas, both in its shapes and in its contents, depicts a decidedly impoverished world; while the circular canvas symbolizes the possibility of "redemption" in history. The temporality of the square canvas works against the circular, eternal ideal of the other. Thus, exactly as in *Surveyor in the City of Lost Dreams*, the circular canvas of *Ice Dream* contains a figurative landscape which promises new, dynamic harmony of nature and culture.

We find the very same thing with Warkov's choice of colours. Initially, the sheer beauty of the painting seems to be at odds with the choice of



B: Warkov, *The Scream Room*

subject-matter: the "screening-off" of the prairie landscape; the "resurrection of the dead", almost as in a dream; the haunting image of *The Scream Room*, where the "scream" represents inner nature tormented by repressive culture. The beauty of Warkov's colours are only a seduction lulling us into her artistic vision, and then forcing, almost unaware, to see the reality of the real world of technology and dependency. At the same time and without contradiction her choice of rich, floral colours dignifies that, even in the midst of pain and exclusion, we live in a world of plenitude. The beauty of her colour thus exists in a dialectical relationship with the less than beautiful reality of the content and themes as a possible and realisable potential. Warkov's artistic imagination offsets the power of the present repressive technological order with the myth of Eden, that realisable secular Eden of the millenarian sects from the Middle Ages down to the present. Warkov recovers in her paintings the language of the myth of Eden as the lost good of our times.

Technological Humanism

Tony Tascona looks at technology in a different way from Warkov. The perfect embodiment of technological humanism, his method of depth

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involvement brings creative participation in the technological experience to a new height. If, as McLuhan claims, the role of the artists in our age becomes prophetic in the sense of providing an early warning of the "psychic and social consequences of new technologies", then Tascona might be viewed as sketching out the history of the future. And he does so in two ways. First, his work has become a single ongoing and dynamic "experiment" with the creative adaptation of new technologies to human survival. Tascona's artistic vision provides the key to understanding the underlying principles of a new, and more organic, reconciliation of technology, nature, and imagination. His work reveals how ecology and technology might be made compatible. And, second, over and beyond the content of his artistic productions, Tascona had developed a "creative method" for responding to the imposition of new technologies: a critical scientific approach to technology which, based on the principles of depth involvement, total participation, and an experimental attitude, may be the only viable human strategy in responding to a bewildering array of new technological inventions.

Tascona's approach to technology throws itself into the future and this tells us that his vision of the technological experience reverses but parallels Warkov's. We might indeed say that Tascona and Warkov represent opposite, although complementary, sides of the Canadian mind on the question of technology. Tascona's artistic imagination is future-oriented, experimental, and interventionist. Warkov's perspective, which begins by privileging time as history, shows with Tascona's perspective a centrifugal and introspective reality. Tascona asserts of his work: "I carry it a step further and say to myself *I would rather be a landscape* — I'd rather go into the landscape, be a part of it, and come out of it with something".¹³ Warkov states the opposite: "I think what I like to do primarily is to interrelate the past and present and make it all seem one. I'd even like to interrelate the past, present and the future and create a whole new world."¹⁴ To Warkov's fascination with the camera (and thus the images of the past), stands Tascona's opposing claim: "I don't want a camera. I just want to walk and enjoy and experience ... or become agitated. I want something to happen to me. I want some friction".¹⁵ That Tascona throws himself outwards as one of the "poles" of the field of technological experience indicates only that he represents that side of the Canadian mind which privileges extension (the abandonment of a "fixed perspective"), formalism (the study of the "inner structures" of physico-social change), and universalism (the priority of space over time). While Warkov makes visible the "intimations of deprival", the silent horizon of a technological society, Tascona allows us to actually see the "aura" surrounding the internal, minute transformations in bio-social experience. That Tascona and Warkov bring different angles of vision to bear on the technological experience signifies, in the end, that the

Canadian discourse on technology has become powerful and unique precisely because it contains a plurality of competing, artistic perspectives. And if we can accurately claim with the physicist, Werner Heisenberg (*The Physicist's Concept of Nature*), "indeterminacy" as the core aspect of the technological experience, then we might also note that one consequence of the principle of indeterminacy allows that contradictory perspectives on the same experience may *all* be true simultaneously.

Like Foucault's "lightning flash", Tascona's work illuminates for an instant the dark obscurity of the world of atoms and cells and tension and flux. This is not a monolithic art for Tascona deliberately chooses fantastic subtlety of colour values and tone registers. As he says of the "close values" of his work: "I would rather not use that many strident values. They sometimes become a way of masking what the subtleties are really supposed to do. Can you imagine all of us walking around with our veins showing in red? Incredible!"¹⁶ But we can discover perhaps another reason for the delicate, geometrical shapes and severe precision of the art. Tascona's imagination has moved beyond the frontiers of the publicly observable contents of experience to a radical exploration of the *formal* structures of experience. His art cannot be called abstract in the sense that it represents an escape from the "reality" of solid objects conceived in naturalistic terms. Instead, his art "abstracts" the essence, the real, from within a multiplicity of particulars existing in a highly complex world, the real conceived of from a scientific, technological angle, yet thoroughly informed with a humanistic perspective.

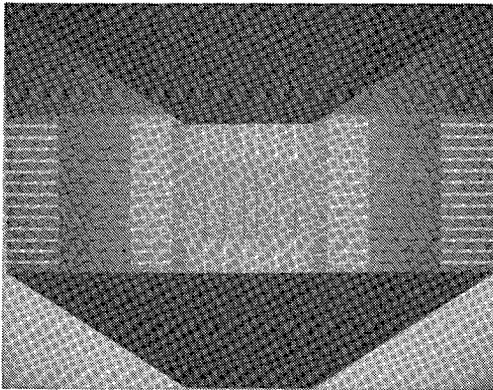
Consider, for example, Tascona's *Serenade*, an acrylic lacquer on laminated aluminum piece in the Drache Tascona Collection at the Faculty of Law, University of Manitoba. The work has been well named, for it offers the psychological effect of a gentle, ordered clarity. This gentle quality Tascona captures through form and colour. The white centre arising out of the grey relief base speaks for itself, for white serves as the conventional symbol of purity or life, as opposed to greyness or darkness. Again, the white becomes the ordered music which emerges out of the "silence" of greyness. The balanced series of circles can easily be seen as the abstract expression of notes in a gentle, progressive and harmonious order. Circles traditionally symbolize perfection and the eternal, as opposed to imperfection and the temporal; thus, the geometrical circular shapes operate with the dominant white colour to create the tranquil effect of the work.

The very same thing happens with the embossed silkscreen print *White Sphere*. Here a white sphere sits in a red space with four narrow concentric rings on its outer periphery, two on the white inside which bleed through the white, and two in a darker red outside the sphere itself. This symbolizes the atomic interaction of an object with its environment to stress activity

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and dynamic process rather than passivity. Inside the sphere we discover another example of this with a couple of embossed lines which run horizontally across the top of the sphere. These symbolise the earthly and the temporal and they push the circle downwards. Surging up towards this, a series of embossed "V" shaped lines thrust against the horizontal lines to suggest a *tension* between vertical and horizontal elements, between temporality and eternity, between dependency and freedom. What finally is this, though, but a perfect visual expression of the ebb and flow of gravity itself?

Tascona seeks to concentrate the *medium* of technology: he does this to illustrate the high drama that takes place in the invisible world of technology turned inside out. He wishes to evoke a psychological response to the internal rules of order of the bio-social world, and to the sheer beauty (*and formal elegance*) of the "dynamic tension", the "edge" which results when technique, space and imagination come together as worlds in collusion. Tascona wishes to fulfill the Medieval promise of technology: to make an experiment again of the technological imagination. His work discloses that human freedom, which in any event cannot be separated from participation in technological experience, can only be renewed on the basis of a creative rethinking of the human relationship to technology. We have here the best of the technological imaginations: the precise point where technology becomes, once more, a way of humanising the world, a way of *seeing ourselves* in the mirror of technology.



C: Tascona, *Re-entry*

That Tascona can join freedom and technology may be due to his participation in depth in the actual "craftsmanship" of technology. Having worked for a number of years as a technician in the Air Canada shops at Winnipeg,

he had on-the-job training and became a shop floor expert in the theory and practice of plating and related chemico-electrical processes. To untrained eyes the act of plating appears to be a sort of mechanical process in which a piece of metal placed in the liquid of a tank takes on a new appearance, just as it would if put into a tank of paint. The educated imagination, however, sees intricate and controlled non-visual processes at work, a scientific structure of matter and transition which consists of largely empty space "filled" with electrical charges, but almost in reverse image. As he says when he describes his first reactions to the "surface tensions" at work in the act of plating: "I became very interested in all the organic structures, the transitions that took place, and the transition was magic to me. It has a kind of aura that really mystified me".¹⁷ Tascona has translated that original sense of the "mystical, spiritual quality" in the transitions of simple forms, simple shapes, into an elegant series of artistic visions of the "inner structure" of change. The primitive act of "seeing" techno-scientific processes at work seems to have been literally swept up into this art object and reproduced as a taut and highly delicate series of "meditations" on the structure of experience. Tascona's imagination thus becomes a *creative mediation* between the natural and industrial landscape and the student of his work. This is the painter who can "see" the invisible "surface tensions" as process: in bodily chemistry, in the physical landscape, in industrial processes.

For example, many Tascona paintings during the 1960's use sculptured bas relief effects obtained through the building up of surfaces around carefully placed tapes, a practice that Tascona continues to present in his more hard-edged geometrical work. The origin of this technique *as practice* belongs to his experience in the Air Canada workshops. The source of the sculptures painted line *as idea* in white has other implications. Apparently producing sculptured two-dimensional works of abstraction in accordance with the modernist distrust of three dimensionality in the first (late sixties) phase of his native style, still in fact, stayed close to the landscape, *but it was landscape viewed from above*. The influence — and it was an unconscious one — came from flying over the Manitoba landscape at relatively low altitudes (an experience we can still undertake to produce sights that are uncannily like a series of Tascona painting of this period). Between 1956-71 while he was with Air Canada, Tascona flew regularly on airline passes as well as privately. On these occasions he absorbed and appropriated the landscape which then emerged in two forms of painting: the textures, organic works of the early sixties which capture the Pre-Cambrian north of Manitoba and Western Ontario; and the more geometrical works of sculptured fields, rivers, roads and air strips of the Manitoba plains landscape seen from above which he produced in the latter half of the 1960's. These phases were by way of a preparation for his entry into the structures of

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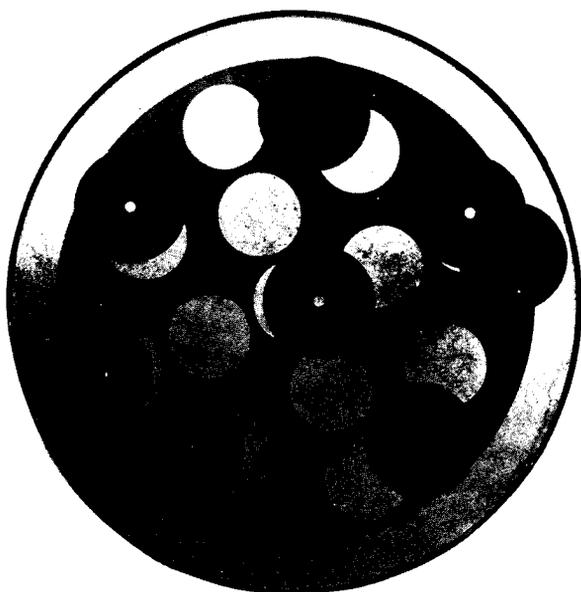
things as processes which brought with it an upward and joyous shift in colour value.

Tascona's ability to experience technology as a matter of the "dynamics of controlled precision" finds no more elegant depiction than in his silkscreen print, *Re-entry*. At first, this work captures our attention as a visual representation of space flight. Tascona strips away any suggestion of heroic individualism through his abstract, non-figurative approach. On the basis of his experience in the aero-space industry, he realised that contemporary technology can only be a collective effort and therefore has no room for heroic individualism. Thus, the controlled precision of the lines points to the precise technology and collective labour that alone made space flight possible. And, as an artist of "surface tensions", Tascona sets the colours and lines of *Re-entry* in opposition to one another. The red symbolized the heat of re-entry and the double layer of red in a downward direction suggests the heat shield and capsule respectively. Tascona's horizontal and vertical lines set in tension against each other recall the jet directional guidance system of the space capsules. Rather than individual heroic action, we have very carefully calculated and precise collective *process* at work here.

The recovery of the promise of technology begins with a very different way of seeing mechanics and engineering. Tascona says: "there's beauty in mechanics, and there's beauty in engineering. Everything depends on the applications of the creative imagination." For him, "When you are casting in resin you can see the transitions taking place, and you can see the transformations. You can actually see the transformations from a liquid to a solid". He always works towards the "crescendo", for as he says: "You can also watch things pyramid. You watch them — you watch them *actually reach a peak*, they become very empirical. They have to crest! It's the order I'm interested in, and everything has an order."¹⁸

Interiors perfectly illustrates the "order" evinced by Tascona. We find at work here a dynamic ecological relationship between the artist and his technical creation; and then, by implication, between *Interiors* and ourselves. What appears to be a serene, placid production reveals itself to be, at any moment, the focus of rapidly changing relationships. There is, at first, the purely experimental relationship between the artist and his product. Tascona says of casting in resin: "I actually work backwards to my end result. I have to build up that layer on layer and tension on tension. I never get away from the tension part. There's always anger there and hidden energy".¹⁹ And further: "It's a very personal thing ... You're always riding the edge ... You're operating on that border line which is interesting".²⁰ What do we have here, then, but the *method* of involvement in depth and total participation? and no distinction emerges between Tascona's experimental attitude towards art and his personal life. Most strikingly, his verbal comments

during interviews indicate a deep continuity between bodily experience, daily life and artistic creation. Thus, Tascona moves continuously from an analysis of underlying chemical processes of change to comments on his own "bodily chemistry", from the "transitions that take place in this country" to transitions in mobiles as they filter light at different points of the day. As he remarks: "You can leave the house, go for your walk and by the time you get back the temperature may have dropped thirty degrees or gone up thirty degrees or fifty. And this is the kind of change that I really enjoy, because it does something to my bodily chemistry and (as soon as that happens) it comes out in my work".²¹



D: Tascona, *Interiors*

We can draw another side to *Interiors* when we viewed it as a perfect model of ecology. Tascona insists that in dealing with the environment, he wants to see transitions taking place: "I deal with light. I want to see something change; I want to change the whole mood, the whole concept of structure, by adding something in it that doesn't take away from the structure". By bringing nature (in the form of the play of light on the hanging sphere), art mediates between nature and building as technology. The success of *Interiors* as technology can be attributed precisely to the fact that it serves as a creative and unobtrusive mediation between structure (the building) and nature (the changing rays of exterior sunlight on the resin). *Interior* thus always changes! Depending upon the time of day or night (and thus the disappearance or reappearance of the sun) and the location (state

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of attention) of the viewer, *Interiors* undergoes a continuous transformation, almost in an organic harmony with the tempo of human and natural activity. *Interiors* gives to nature that which is nature's and to technology that which is technology's. It accommodates the biologically and physically given to the socially created and made. This process makes Tascona the creator, the embodiment of a technological humanism.

Technological Realism

A third, powerful perspective on technology in the Manitoba vision we can call the artistic vision of technological realism. This expression of the visual imagination — the relationship of technology, landscape, and society — situates itself midway between the poles of lament (technological dependency) and utopia (technological humanism). If Warkov provides a series of haunting images of the tragic aspect of modern technology, and if Tascona explores the prospects for creative freedom in the development of a new approach to understanding technology, then technological realism exists as a dynamic synthesis of these contrasting perspectives on technology. As a "way of seeing" technology the realist perspective shares fully in the lament for the suppression of historical traditions by the ruthless imposition of the culture and economy of advanced technological society. Its psychological force produces initially a profound and overwhelming impression of *despair*. But technological realism also refers to a dynamic meeting in the artistic imagination of past and future, domination and freedom, resignation and creation. So just at the moment that it threatens to dissolve into a paralyzing sense of moral grief for that which has been lost in the coming-to-be of technological society, at that precise instant it gets suddenly pulled into the future, and hope, by the promise of an *emancipatory* technology. The peculiar agony, and certainly the source of the great creativity, of technological realism is that it is a product of an ongoing struggle between the "warring" perspectives of technology as domination and freedom. In the artistic vision of technological realism we suddenly move into something entirely new and unpredictable! At any moment, the realist perspective exists as the forward edge of the continuing "reconciliation" in the Canadian discourse between the extremes of utopia (*cultural* imagination) and dependency (*historical* imagination). Technological realism might, in fact, be interpreted as an almost literal, psychological read-out of the Canadian mind, on where we stand as a political community between the poles of domination and emancipation, between instrumentalism and finalism. This troubled artistic perspective becomes a controversial and brilliant record of the "thinking out" in Canadian society of the relationship between technology and civilisation.

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Two Manitoba artists exemplify the perspective of technological realism: Don Proch and Ivan Eyre.

Proch has pioneered the use of the *mask* to express the paradoxical and ambivalent interplay of technology and the prairie landscape. Not incidental to understanding the *method* of Proch's realism is the incipiently populist political-social basis of that method which we find as the Ophthalmia Company collection. Since his first, major exhibition in Winnipeg in the early seventies, Proch has worked whenever possible with a group of friends and relatives who band together as The Ophthalmia Company of Inglis, Manitoba. Ophthalmia is not a legal corporation, but in the genuine populist sense a community of friends held together by the pioneer values of solidarity and mutual self-help. Ophthalmia itself means *inflammation of the eye or its appendages*. In the vast, new world opened up by Proch's imagination, everything becomes ophthalmia, or eye irritation. Proch commonly takes familiar scenes, objects, concepts and distorts them in order (a) to break the patterns of habit that prevent us from seeing social reality clearly or (b) to force us to "see" experience so as to create a proper remembrance of the past (rural) even as it is brought under the influence (technological and urban) of the present. In fact, the Ophthalmia Company inflames the eye of the viewer only to shift his mechanisms of perception, to transform the way in which he actually "looks" at the world. Proch insists that we *learn* anew how to look directly at our own technological reality; and, specifically, at the complex relationship among technique, community and space. As Proch says of his artistic productions: "I work high-technology in with some remnants of the past: fibre optics, laser beams, together with bones".²⁴ In his work, the future (of high-technology) rubs against the past (the remembrance of the Aessippi experience); an utopia of formal beauty grates against the sheer despair of contents. Everything functions to express the "tension" in society between past and future. But Proch does not emerge as the artist of either lament or of utopia: his singular imagination fuses despair and fascination into a new vision of the human situation. He is, in fact, the "Innis" of Canadian art: the artist who, however, unconsciously, has expressed in the language of visual art the essential insight achieved by Harold Innis in *Empire and Communications*. In that work, Innis says we must view the history of technology as coeval with the unfolding of western civilisation. And it has been in the specific sense that the inhabitants western civilisation have always experienced technology as a warring struggle between "centrifugal and centripetal forces", between time and space. Innis tells us that "Concentration on a medium of communication implies a bias in the cultural development of the civilisation concerned either towards an emphasis on space and political organisation or towards an emphasis on time and religious organisation".²⁵ All of Proch's works, in

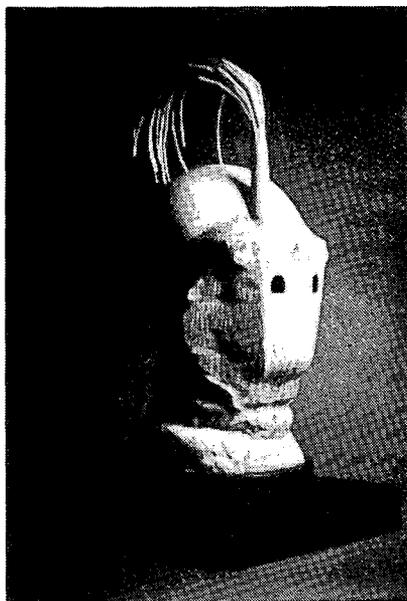
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some measure, express an eloquent and searing tension between time and space, between power and remembrance, in the meeting of modern technology and the prairie landscape. And what makes Proch the authentic artist of the "New World" is that, in his work, everything hangs in balance, nothing has been settled. The protracted struggle over the fate of technology, whether it will be an emancipatory experience or an instrument of domination, remains to be decided.

There is always a lightning quick reversal in Proch's work. He shows us that the interplay of technology and landscape contains contradictory possibilities, and this simultaneously. All depends on our ability to see clearly, without flinching, technological dependency, and to have the courage to act. In this regard, Proch emerges very much as existentialist in the tradition of the French philosopher, Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre insisted that human freedom begins with the understanding that while we always remain *implicated* in the human situation, the crucial task of free human beings must be to attempt to transcend their situation, to become the creative agents rather than the dupes of history. In the end, individual Canadians become the wild cards, the undecided fate, in the technological experience.

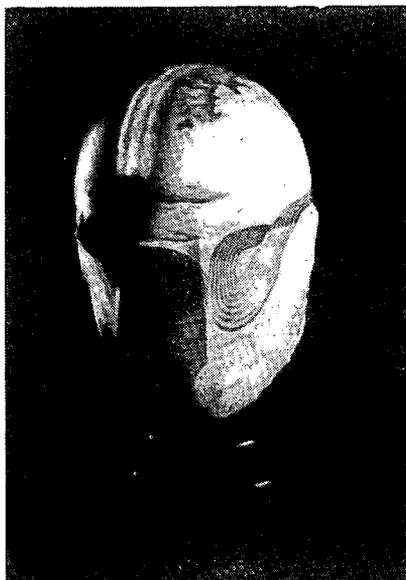
We can catch something of this ambivalence in Proch's understanding of technology in his use of the *mask* as a way of representing artistically the struggle in the prairie experience between tradition and technocracy, between time and space. Proch's series of masks perfectly express the warring possibilities in the technological experience. On the one hand, the masks (*Prairie Plough Mask*, *Manitoba Mining Mask*, *Chicken Bone Mask*) offer as starkly a realistic, as grisly an image as could be found of the overwhelming effect of technocracy in *reworking* the landscape of nature and the human mind. To the extent that what appears on the outside of the mask signifies what the mind sees from the inside, we come as close as possible to what the Canadian thinker, Edmund Carpenter, warned would be the human fate when confronted with the power of technology: "They became what they beheld".²⁶ Proch's masks visually represent the impact of the industrial technology "massaging" the human brain, and suppressing both organic nature and human imagination. They are almost *suffocating* images of life in contemporary society. Proch thus provides nothing less than a deep, psychological insight into the functioning of modern technology. The loss of that which is most precious in human experience (Proch speaks always of the need for "remembrance") seems almost irrecoverable. Death lurks everywhere within Proch's work: the mining shafts as "eyes" in *Manitoba Mining Mask*; the hands sticking out of the muskeg in *Walking Plow*; the skull image in *Prairie Plough Mask*.

But the search for the source of the tension lead us to another meaning of the masks. When Adele Freedman (*Saturday Night*) heads an article with the words "Don Proch is the shaman of prairie art", she does so because the



E: Proch, *Manitoba Mining Mask*

mask has a symbolic, mythological meaning. This shamanistic quality of the mask has been described eloquently by Karyn Allen in her review of Proch's contribution to an important exhibit: *The Winnipeg Perspective 1981 — RITUAL:*



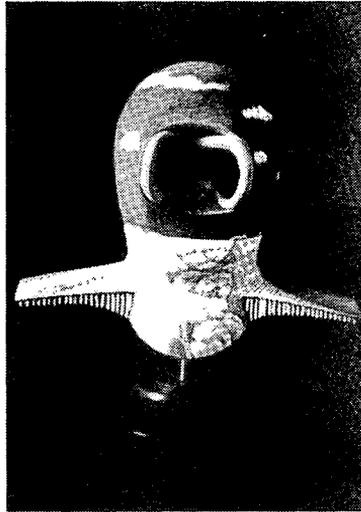
F: Proch, *Rainbow Mask*

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The donning of the mask as a means of summoning an absent spirit is a central practice of shamanistic rites. The ritual implication is that, by the wearing of the mask, one exchanges identities with the spirit implied by the mask's symbols and images. In several of "Proch's own masks there is an implied interchange, or fusion, between the human and imagistic elements. In other of his masks, the shamanistic notion of the mask as protection from the evil spirits might be inferred. The *Manitoba Mining Mask* is an obvious example.²⁷

Proch's masks, in a profound sense, summon "forth ... the spirit of the land"²⁸ Proch, in fact, makes the exchange of identities implied by the "donning of the mask" explicit when he describes the "clouds as brains" and emphasises that there is always "a relationship to the eyes".²⁹ "The idea of the landscape on the head just came from a vision of the prairies where you relate to it at eye level. It's almost like 360 degree peripheral vision, so that even though you are looking at one area you have a sense of what's around you and behind you. It's much the same as turning on a turntable, except the inverse of that".³⁰ The mask serves the purpose of "rethinking" the relationship between human purpose (technology) and environment in the prairie experience. Here technology itself (the *human presence* in reworking the land) becomes the *third dimension* of the prairie environment. Proch says: "I consider my pieces three dimensional drawings. Drawing the landscape in three dimensions is again a way of being aware totally of your environment or of trying to get as close to it as you can".³¹ If Proch can correctly be called "the shaman of prairie art", then, it is because in meditating on the dialectical interplay (the "fusion" of identities) between the environment and technology, he has actually articulated a new language of seeing. Proch masks, by forcing us to become "aware totally" of the environment, mark also the beginning of along, human recovery. They suggest that the environment (*Inglis View Mask, Rainbow Mask, Prairie Nude*) works its effects silently, but relentlessly, by providing its inhabitants with a different way of seeing. And by seeking to make us aware of the impact of industrial technologies in "screening off" the environment, Proch appeals to the spirit of the land itself for assistance in the delicate process of "healing damaged human personalities. Ultimately, Proch's work has an important *therapeutic* value.

It's the very same with the artistic imagination of Ivan Eyre. This Canadian artist has created a series of mythological painting of post-modern society (*Moos-O-Men, Birdmen*) which seem almost unspeakable because they force to the surface of our consciousness the deep archetypes at work in technocratic society. In much the same way as Freud said of Leonardo da



G: Proch, *Night Landing*

Vinci, we might remark of Eyre that he woke "to find himself in the middle of the nightmare that he thought he was only dreaming".³² Eyre says, in fact, of his "mythological" paintings that their dominant themes move and play at the edge of "distant madnesses". "They (distant madnesses) usually occur on the horizon line out of my touch, out of my reach, which is the way I see violence as never having happened to me directly, but as always out there somewhere".³³ The painter of "distant madnesses", Eyre expresses his perspective on technology in a different language of painting from that of Proch's. But, we can see the artistic visions of Proch and Eyre to be similar to the extent that both disclose a nightmarish account of modern society, a society — in its technocratic dimension — which they reveal to be ghoulish, demonic, and a matter of dead souls. Eyre's work compels us to see, perhaps for the first time, the *dark side* of technocratic society. While Proch has recourse to the rich imagery of the mask as a way of shattering normal vision; Eyre's imagination has roots in the language of archetypes. He introduces us to a dream-like state which forces us further and further back in time, always in search of the deep, and monstrous, symbolism released by technocratic society. Eyre says of the *method* of his strictly mythological paintings: "Each viewpoint tends to live in a long, horizontal rectangle; and as one moves from one demarcation line to the next, *one tends to shift from one time sequence to another as you move up the canvas*". His paintings evince an almost single-minded fascination with the archetypes of modern experience. This leads Eyre to state his main concern, which run through the landscape and mythological works, to be the "basic form irrespective of

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subject".³⁴ While Proch employs the mask as a way of evoking the "dual landscape" inherent in the meeting of technology/nature in the prairie environment, Eyre deals in the more ambiguous language of "metamorphosis". His works act as an "early warning system" which states explicitly that in equating human freedom with the release of the "dynamic energies" of technology, we may have, however inadvertently, released demons beyond our control. The ancient myth of Prometheus works behind Eyre's imagination. His paintings hint, over and over, that we have yet to pay the price for our technological domination of nature. The technoscope has allowed us to be promethean, or god-like, in the sense of extending, almost without limits, our control over human and non-human nature. But now, just as the Canadian theorist of technology, Eric Havelock, said in his classic study, *The Myth of Prometheus*, the other side of the "dream" of Prometheus reveals itself. The dark side of the promethean dream, the "will to technology", shows itself to contain the seeds of destruction. The future doom of society motivated by an unlimited urge to mastery lay hidden and already foretold in its past. The "metamorphosis" (*Moos-O-Men, Birdmen*), a constant theme of Eyre's imagination, only says that a sure and certain doom awaits those civilisations which disregard the limits of tolerance of social and non-social nature.

Eyre becomes a technological realist because, like Proch, his work evinces a profound ambivalence. In Proch's work, the oscillation between technological humanism and technological dependency, appears most strikingly in the vast difference of themes between the threatened landscape of *Manitoba Mining Mask* and the organic unity of *Rainbow Nude* and the unsettling effect of *Night Landing*. In Eyre's imagination, the warring struggle between the contrasting impulses to utopia and dependency is even more striking. It's the clash of perspectives between the "mythological" paintings and the almost "mystical" painting of *Hill Mist* or *Sky Pass*. The sharp transition in Eyre's vision between the nightmare of the past (*Moos-O-Men, Birdmen*) and the utopia of the spirit (*Sky Pass*) resembles the earlier work of another Canadian painter, Lawren Harris. Like Eyre, Harris's work also moved between an earlier phase of naturalism (the artistic analogue of dependency) and a later stage of mystical (idealistic) paintings, guided by the religious humanism of theosophy.

The genius of Eyre lies in his ability to harmonise the geometric, "cool" lines of abstraction (the *sine qua non* of the technological experience) and the organic flow of the natural landscape. His paintings suggest that human intervention (technique) in the environment should work, not to produce a boring flatness of effect, but a paradise of "high contrasts". This is most explicit in *Sky Pass*. Of this painting, Eyre has said that here is a "contrast



H: Eyre, *Birdmen*

and conflict in the processes which make for a kind of drama in it. The trapezoid embodies a work that the surrounding space can't really embody".³⁵ We might say, that for Eyre, the relationship between technology and nature should always have something about it that resembles the relationship between art and experience. "They are separate realities. And as soon as we begin to confuse art experience with our everyday life, then I feel less enchanted with it. I'm not as interested".³⁶ The secret of Eyre's imagination is his wonderful capacity to take us by surprise; to teach us, in effect the preciousness of a world view which works by "creating surprises", "foils", in order to provide another, perhaps richer, perspective on nature and life. And so, *Sky Pass* takes us by surprise; it draws out the magisterial quality of the mountain landscape by introducing the "high contrast" of the space-like trapezoid. "The impetus (for the trapezoid) had to do with a sensation I had while travelling through the mountains; of imagining my spirit to be running free through the valley. (It's) another way of moving through that space, perhaps opposite to the lateral movements that are going on in the rest of the painting. It's a way of getting up and through that central area in, dare I say, a spiritual or elevated state".³⁷

To the extent that the recovery of a *substantive*, as opposed to instrumental, approach to technology depends upon a new way of thinking about the complex relationship of nature, community, and technique, then Eyre is also

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instructive in developing an alternative "language of technology". What Eyre has to say about the language of painting applies directly to rethinking the fundamentals of the technology experience. Eyre argues, and this very eloquently, that "in the painting, intellect without feeling is meaningless. All the human emotions have to be within the language of painting".³⁸ The "purpose" of painting is neither to submerge itself in life (thus Eyre says



G: Eyre, *Sky Pass*

that art and life are different) nor is it to remain detached from "social problems". For Eyre, painting should remain *abstract* in the precise sense that "the abstract mind is the mind moving at full tilt".³⁹ And a mind "functioning at full tilt" is one which fuses imagination and environment in such a way as "to build something that in some ways suggests the future". Eyre seeks a "language of painting" which, in an entirely realistic fashion, draws out the radiant energy of the human being.⁴⁰

I don't think of a human being as a silhouette with a head on top, two arms, a torso in the middle with two legs. I see it as something far more complicated and complex and unknowable.

Almost an energy system with changing viewpoints, where the spaces outside the figure are invited into the interior as a real physical force, rather than letting the figure be the reality and the space beyond simply the background.⁴¹

In Eyre's viewpoint, the language of painting aims at grasping the inner structure of society, of individual human reality, *by working its way inside them*. The painter is most creative when he is isolated *within* society, not

outside of it. And thus, the "language of painting" works its effects as a creative agency within society by insisting on the dynamic "symmetry" of human experience. "(It's like) borders within borders, and boxes within boxes, where there is a kind of core; and things fold out from that (core) or come in again: like a flower, opening and closing".⁴²

Now, Eyre's approach to painting as a way of blasting through ideologies and of uncovering a "multitude of perspectives" within the human situation, also provides a vital key to the creation of a new language of technology. If, finally, George Grant is correct in saying the "technique is ourselves", then, perhaps, we have to rethink technique in the creative imagery of Canadian artists. By implication, Eyre would tell us that a *substantive* understanding of technology would begin by insisting that social productions set in motion a dynamic *process* of self-transcendence and self-fulfillment. A worthwhile technology would be like the trapezoid in *Sky Pass*: it would express in dynamic *form* the inner beauty of life and nature, while providing, at the same time, a "high contrast" with the present human predicament. It would be realistic in the sense of speaking to *real* human needs; and, simultaneously, it would make demands on the human imagination. Like a painting which draws together the pure "mental formations" of the intellect with almost primitive human feelings, technique would represent a "dynamic synthesis" of morality, intellect, economy, and feeling. And the ultimate objective of a *substantive* technology? If Eyre is correct, it might, in fact, be erroneous to think in terms of an extrinsic end for technology which would stand apart from actual, *lived* experience. Technology might better be rethought as a creative process, each phase of which would be intended to amplify the "radiant energies" of human beings and to connect again to an inner harmony of structure and history between the land and its people.

The Mirror of Technology

Considered not as a static event but as a creative process, the technological experience would fulfil the promise *and* the challenge inherent in the works of Proch and Eyre. A creative technology would explode closed ideological systems and provide for the generation of a "multitude of perspectives" on the human situation. And the means towards the ideal of technology as a creative process? Nothing other, of course, than the challenge of rethinking the technological experience from the dynamic perspective of the "language of painting". It may be that Proch and Eyre have shown us more than the "mirror of technology"; their ambiguity, what makes their work fascinating, is precisely that there is also an *inner curvature* in the mirror of technology. It's not just a matter of living in a transitional age in which everything is

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easily divisible into past and future, and into remembrance and possibility. It is now the human fate to live in a fully ambiguous and contradictory age: an age in which the historical lament of Esther Warkov can exist simultaneously with the dynamic utopia of Tony Tascona for the simple reason that *both are true simultaneously*. If "technique is ourselves" then it is also the human fate that we witness being played out in the mirror of technology. And, to the extent that we stand with Eyre in a nightmarish world which is literally flying apart at the seams, a world in which the "centre can no longer hold" and, with Proch, on the forward edge of a new human possibility: well, to the extent that *contradiction* is our fate, then everything depends, as it always has and ever will, on the human courage to think the world anew in the ambivalent language of painting.

Political Science
Concordia University
English
St John's College
University of Manitoba

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- A: Warkov, *Surveyor in the City of Lost Dreams*
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- I: Eyre, *Sky Pass*

Notes

For a more elaborate description of the Canadian discourse on technology, see Arthur Kroker, *Technology and the Canadian Mind: Innis/McLuhan/Grant*, St. Martin's Press: New York, 1985/ New World Perspectives: Montréal, 1984. For a more intensive description of the artistic productions of six contemporary Manitoba artists, see Kenneth J. Hughes, *Manitoba Art Monographs*, Winnipeg, 1982.

This article is also being published in French translation ("*Technologie et art émancipatoire: la vision manitobaine*") in *Sociologie et Société*, Université de Montréal (Winter, 1986).

The interviews with Tony Tascona, Esther Warkov, Don Proch and Ivan Eyre were conducted by TV Ontario, and used as background material for the development of a series on Canadian artists titled *Visions* (1983).

KROKER/HUGHES

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38. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
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42. *Ibid.*, p. 10.