

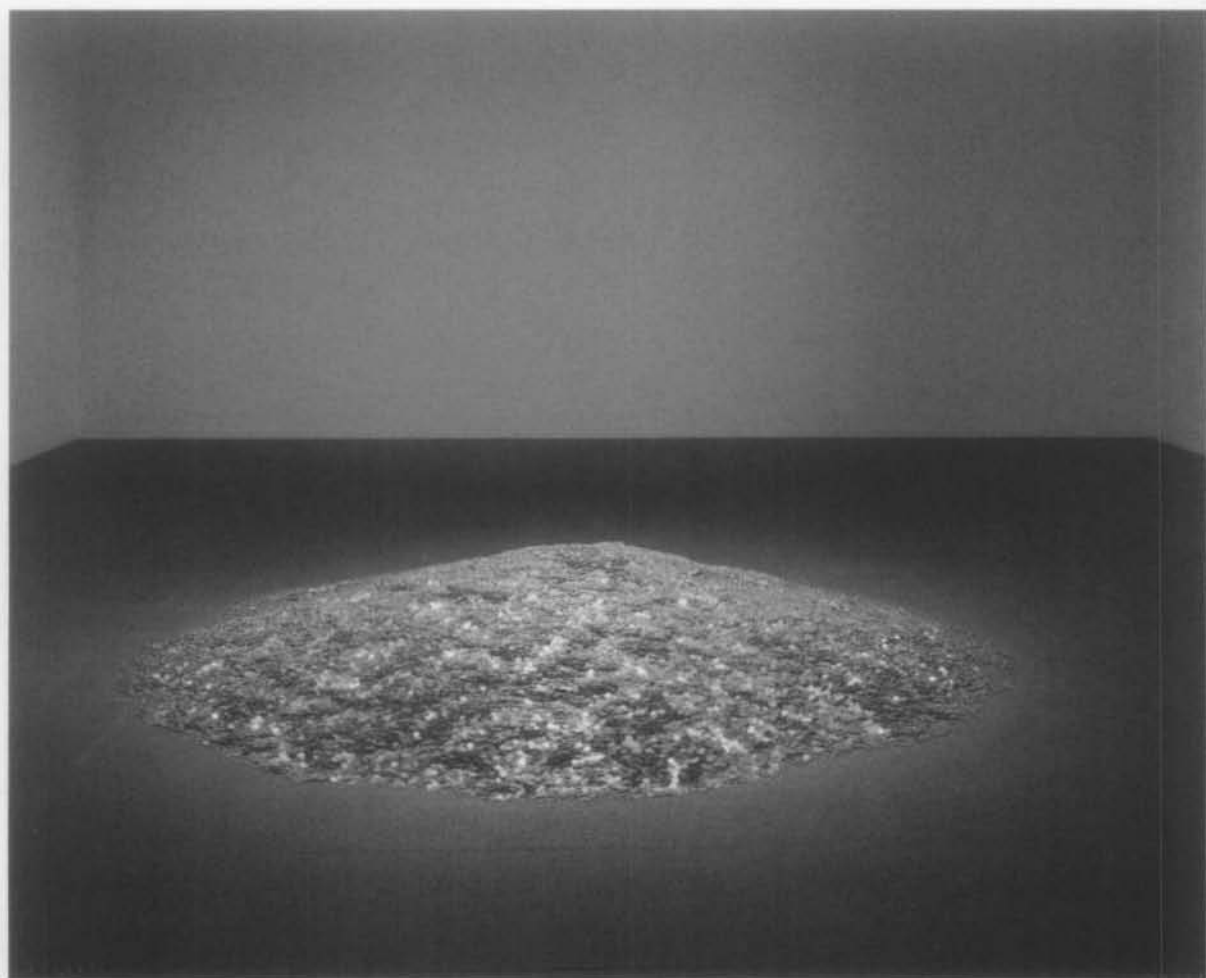


fig.1 Gerald Ferguson, *1,000,000 Pennies*, 1979, 1,000,000 Canadian pennies, collection of the artist, installed at the National Gallery of Canada, 1999. (Photo: National Gallery of Canada)

LATE STYLE IN THE WORK OF GERALD FERGUSON

The maturity of the late works of significant artists does not resemble the kind one finds in fruit. They are, for the most part, not round, but furrowed, even ravaged. Devoid of sweetness, bitter and spiny, they do not surrender themselves to mere delectation. They lack all the harmony that the classicist esthetic is in the habit of demanding from works of art, and they show more traces of history than of growth.¹

Late in 1999, a moment of no mere *fin de siècle ennui* but full-fledged end-of-the-millennium gravitas, I was preparing a slightly ironic exhibition for the National Gallery of Canada about time and big numbers which I called *2000 and Counting*. The two artists in the first part of the show, which opened in November, were the Japanese Tatsuo Miyajima, and the Canadian (and transplanted former American) Gerald Ferguson. Ferguson's contribution to the exhibition consisted of two works quite different in terms of appearance and date, that nonetheless spoke very well to my theme because of their literal manifestation of vast quantities: a glittering heap of three tonnes of newly-minted pennies in one room and a dizzying grid of one hundred black paintings that filled the walls of another, not to mention the counting implied in their titles, and the large-scale manufacturing processes or the huge number of repeated painterly gestures involved in making them. These attributes introduced just the balance of fact and metaphor that I was looking for.

The two works were *1,000,000 Pennies* (fig.1), which Ferguson first assembled with the help of a bank loan for an exhibition at the Glenbow Museum in Calgary in 1980, and *1,000,000 Grapes* (fig.2), which he painted in Halifax in 1996 and 1997, using a stencil of forty grapes and 250 passes over each canvas with a roller laden with black enamel paint, representing 10,000 grapes per canvas (fig.3). Although Ferguson's well-known work ethic and commitment to task-like procedures to make his art give one no reason to doubt that the painted grapes do indeed total one million, it is impossible to verify this visually, as the individual clusters are lost in an expanse of inky blackness (with small spots of white canvas showing through here and there), leaving at least one critic to note the resemblance of the installed canvases to starry skies. It is, in fact, possible to continue this metaphor of infinitude, comparing the telluric origins of the copper in the bright pile of pennies — a modern paean to the limitless power of shiny things to fascinate human beings — with the dark, absorptive surface of the orderly rows of canvases which reflect their blackness in the shiny surface of the

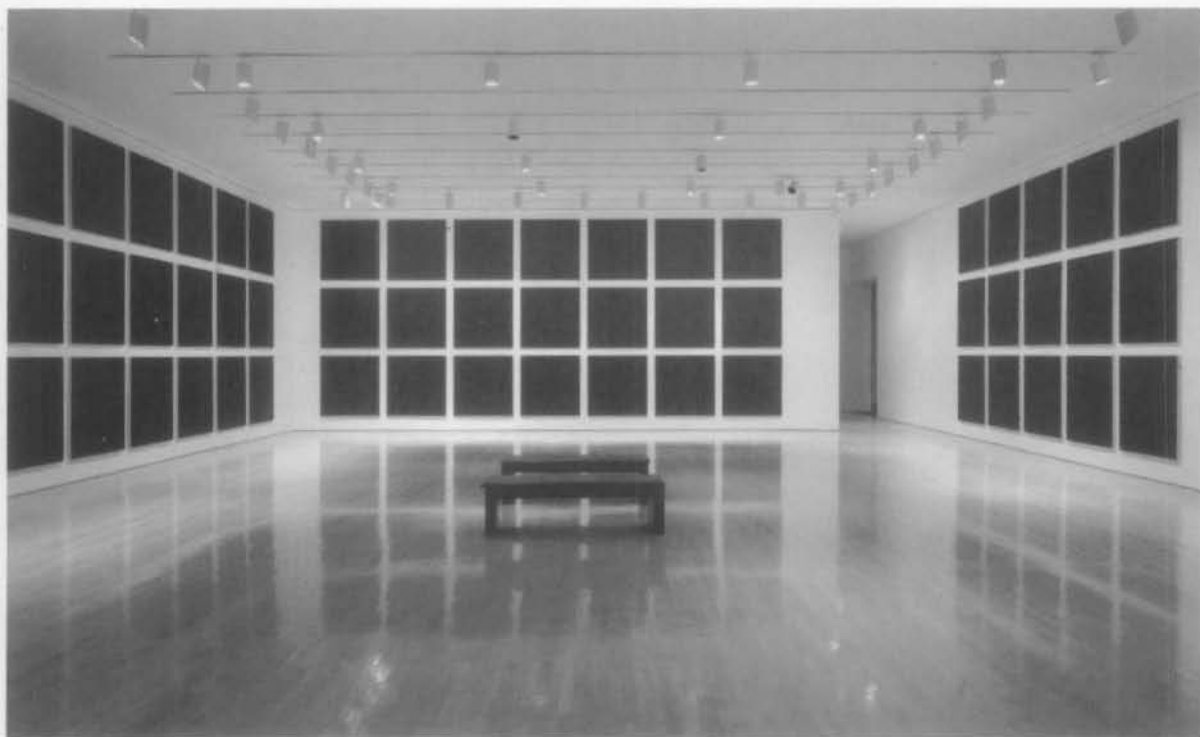


fig.2 Gerald Ferguson, *1,000,000 Grapes*, 1996-97, acrylic gloss enamel on canvas, 120 x 120 cm (each canvas), courtesy of the Wynick/Tuck Gallery, Toronto, installed at the National Gallery of Canada, 1999. (Photo: National Gallery of Canada)

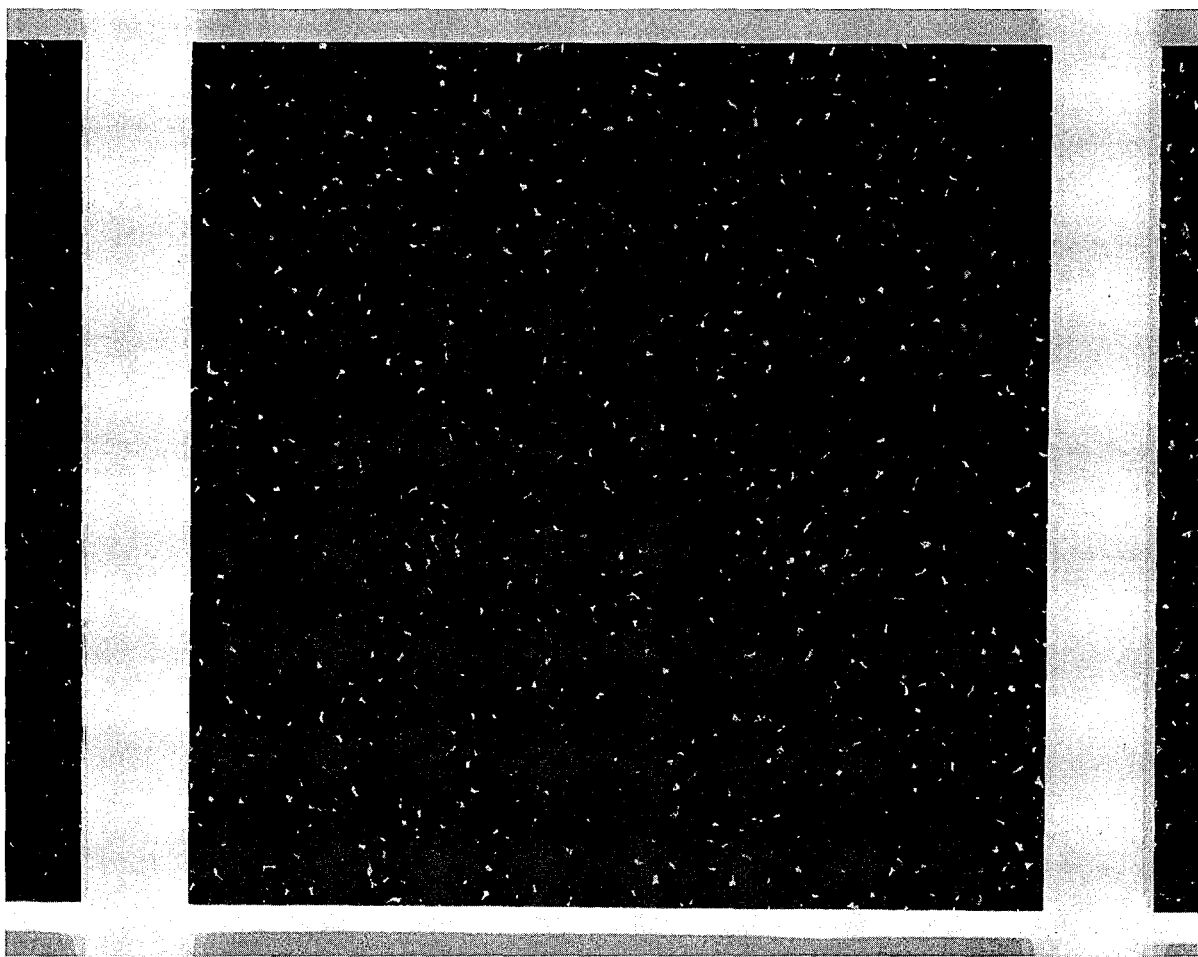


fig. 3 Gerald Ferguson, *10,000 Grapes* (detail), 1996-97, acrylic gloss enamel on canvas, 120 x 120 cm, Mount Saint Vincent University Coll., gift of the artist. (Photo: Steve Farmer)



fig.4 Gerald Ferguson, *Untitled*, 1969, enamel paint on unprimed canvas, 173 x 310 cm, National Gallery of Canada. (Photo: National Gallery of Canada)

floor, causing another space to open up beneath one's feet. But it is unlikely that Ferguson had anything like infinity on his mind in making these works. Quite the opposite, one suspects, though he must have enjoyed the intangible effects on the imagination that these extremely tangible works provoked.

In one way, *1,000,000 Pennies* and *1,000,000 Grapes* are quite similar, as each is made up of a multitude of small discs or disc-like forms. The use of repeated units to create a work has been characteristic of Ferguson's modular art-making procedures throughout his career, but the discs recall in particular the dot paintings he made in the late sixties and early seventies, one of which, an untitled painting from 1969 (fig.4), is in the collection of the National Gallery. In appearance, however, this painting differs from the later works, as it is composed of vertical rows of black dots clearly, though somewhat unevenly (owing to the irregularities of each pass with the spray can of paint over the template, which was a length of plasterer's corner beading) delineated on the white ground of the canvas. It is this orderliness, together with an economical avoidance of excess, that distinguishes this painting and others like it made in the seventies from later works like *1,000,000 Pennies* and *1,000,000 Grapes*, and which perhaps led Dennis Young to recall the old-fashioned principle of "decorum" in his discussion of these works. "In such art," Young wrote,

"the formal result, though unpredictable in detail, would demonstrate that the work existed not capriciously, at the artist's whim to modify or terminate a sequence, nor to conform with some past expectation of taste, but absolutely — as a system that proclaimed its own inexorable order."²

Young is describing the deliberate suppression of personality that is characteristic of much art derived from conceptual principles since the sixties, best articulated by Sol LeWitt's famous statement in his 1967 *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art*, "The idea becomes a machine that makes the art."³ Ferguson certainly adhered to such principles, mentioning LeWitt along with Carl Andre, Joseph Kosuth and Lawrence Weiner as artists whose ideas were of interest to him at the time. However, he "could not accept the notion that visual considerations were not part of visual art,"⁴ and has remained committed to painting, with occasional interruptions while he explored other media, throughout his career. Yet by his own admission, the painting of the late sixties held no interest for him.⁵ Staying away from traditional artists' materials, he used enamel paints and improvised templates employed according to systematic, predetermined procedures, to produce reasonably regular, rationally-structured compositions, thereby setting his paintings at a distance from the aestheticized visual pleasures of formalist abstraction. The phrase "with care taken" recurs several times in his notes on individual paintings, conveying the workmanlike attitude Ferguson brought to the tasks he set himself. In regard to such work, the notion of a style based on "decorum," in the sense intended in Latin rhetoric, which judged the fitness of the level of language used in relation to the audience addressed and the purpose intended, seems appropriate. Of the grand, the mixed and the plain styles identified by the Romans, Ferguson's is clearly plain.

The significance of style, however, goes beyond how something is expressed. It is also the mutual adjustment of expressive form and content, an artist's personal manner evolving over time, as well as the range of choices available to him or her at a particular moment and place in history. This is true even with regard to the "absolute" and "inexorable order" of systemic art like Ferguson's, and Eric Cameron is right to note that "system is not an alternative to sensibility." Elaborating, Cameron states, "The system is respected throughout, but Gerald Ferguson himself is the maker of the object as well as the deviser [*sic*] of the system, and at the end he exercises a visual judgement as to the acceptability of the results."⁶

Early Work in a Late Style

Late style is not only manifest in the late work of an artist. It can also be discovered to be the style of the period in which the artist matures, late modernism in the case of Gerald Ferguson. And in a more general way, as the situation of art reflects that of society, it can be argued that the latter part of the twentieth century in the West

is marked by a pervasive sense of lateness, overwhelmed, at times, by a consciousness of the history that has preceded it. A rapid survey of art critics and theorists as different as Clement Greenberg, Arthur Danto, Yve-Alain Bois and Frederic Jameson, reveals the frequency with which phrases like "the crisis of Western art," "post-historical," "late capitalism," and "the death of painting" appear in their writings on culture. Theodor Adorno, the philosopher and cultural critic who has written eloquently about late style in the work of Beethoven, opens his own late work, *Aesthetic Theory*, with a radical statement of contingency: "It is self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore, not its inner life, not its relation to the world, not even its right to exist." Adorno's view of the modern world is pessimistic, even fatalistic: it is a world in which "individual and social interests are irreconcilable and where general harmony can be obtained only at the expense of individual freedom."⁷ To protest these conditions, art must become negative if it is to remain authentic, inverting the affirmation that constitutes the commodity form. Further, if art is to exist in a critical relationship to society, while at the same time embodying the social tendencies of its time, as Adorno believed, it must become ever more autonomous, deriving its forms from the specifications of the artist's imagination. However, the artist's subjective freedom is not unlimited; the artist is "constrained by history to deal with the most advanced... material available," for this is what "provides the experience of increasing freedom, openness, newness."⁸

Ferguson's early work turns on the invention of objective structures and impersonal procedures that deliberately limit subjective freedom in the search for an authentic position from which to make art. Looking back on his early work, Ferguson describes how his interest in and identification with the radical art issues of the late sixties, which were reductionist and conceptual, caused feelings of conflict and even guilt with his role as a painter. Although painting was supposedly dead, he writes,

I needed painting's physical and visual confirmation (and still do), along with all of the attendant strategies, structures and methods as intellectual reassurance. I felt I was doing something to change the face and understanding of painting by the marks I was making on canvas. This was the only position I could take, because painting is the only thing I ever really understood. Yet I hated so much that was synonymous with painting such as class (painting's use as a conspicuous display of property and position), the self-indulgence, and the privileged place of the artist as a historical norm.⁹

Further, he had doubts about the social role of art. Although he did not believe that art in itself could bring about social change, he had faith, at first, in its capacity to affect society indirectly. Therefore, art institutions had a moral imperative to foster art's development. However, disillusionment soon set in: "So much of the art that I had identified as being radical was being assimilated by those very structures and institutions that it had formerly threatened."¹⁰

His response was to try to demystify the art-making process. Looking for a formal readymade, he stumbled on the alphabet and made a series of works with the typewriter, twenty-six pages filled within preset margins with a single, repeated letter. The only criterion was that each page be error-free. It was more difficult than it looked and took a considerable length of time to complete. Intending to transfer the process to painting, he used four-inch stencils and spray paint and made several works with stencilled letter forms before he hit upon the idea of using the period from the stencil. This can be seen as an ironic reference to the search for the "degree zero" of painting, perhaps, that resulted in the dot paintings. Less potentially abstract were two paintings based on the letter "I", one executed in black paint sprayed through a stencil of a seriffed "I", and the other drawn in pencil around an "I" without a serif. At first one sees only the abstract pattern of the surfaces of the two canvases. At a deeper level, however, one must acknowledge the representational meaning that the letter let into the two paintings — the reference to the singular identity of the author — even though it is cancelled out by the repetition of the gesture. Creative authorship and its associations with inspiration and expression are held in abeyance, replaced by a strict, production-oriented work ethic.

When one looks attentively at Ferguson's work from about 1968 to 1978, what becomes apparent is the discipline with which he submitted to the rational logic of the self-imposed structure of his works. Nowhere is this containment of subjectivity made more objectively clear than in a drypoint etching from 1972 titled *Close to the edge, but not going over the edge*. The image is of a square defined by the bevelled edge of the etching plate, within which a hand-drawn, continuous, but irregular line is traced. The double entendre of the title points obliquely to what is at stake: the risk of losing the singular balance of subjective and objective reality in the work of art. The wavering line of the square within the square exemplifies the artist's struggle for control, while at the same time it forms the imperfect, human side of an irreconcilable dichotomy between subjective freedom and the objective structure of the work. One can see a similar, though less obviously psychological opposition in the stencilled dot paintings. Their visual interest derives from the tension in their formal law between arbitrariness and order. In the gap between the rationality of the procedures and the unavoidable imperfection of the execution, one glimpses the human truth in their machine-like aesthetic. The invisible referent in all the works of this early period is work itself. Work well-done confers moral value on painting, confirming its possibility and its worth independent of its status as commodity.

Changing Values

Noting the challenge that the growing pluralism of art in the seventies posed to the progressive and linear view of the development of modern art, Nancy Tousley

wrote in an article on Canadian painting: "The one aspect of 70s painting that might not be expected to continue with vigour into the 80s is analytic process painting. Stemming from minimal and conceptual art, process in and of itself seems to have outlived its purpose as the single motivation for making painting." She did, however, suggest that conceptualism might still be a force in "reopening areas for artistic exploration through the making of objects."¹¹

The decade of the eighties was a period of reevaluation in Gerald Ferguson's work, in which he absorbed and responded to a crisis in art marked by the return of image painting, the rise of the relativist theories of postmodernism, and the growing importance of the art market. He left the task-like procedures of systemic painting behind, choosing to interrogate interrelated issues of authenticity, the mediation of experience and the commodification of art. The turning point came in 1979 with the proposal for *1,000,000 Pennies*, a pile of pennies in a room that both literally and symbolically embodies value. Ferguson's statement for the catalogue of the Glenbow Museum's presentation of the work in 1980 takes on the issue directly:

When acquired, it is the option of the owner whether the sculpture is displayed as described in the form of 3 tonnes of copper coins, or when stored, deposited in a bank where it will accrue interest as a \$10,000 savings account.

Currently, the selling price of the work is \$10,000. The artist will defer payment if the prospective buyer agrees to supply the one million pennies and deposit them in a bank until the investment generated equals the initial investment in the material, thus establishing objective value in the work. At prevailing interest rates, it will take about six years for the piece to reach maturity. With the mutual consent of the artist, the piece may be periodically withdrawn from the bank and displayed, therefore, it will take an indeterminate time before the artist is paid.

After that, it is at the discretion of the owner whether to continue to deposit the one million pennies in a bank, allowing them to further appreciate, or to withdraw them and keep it as a sculpture, in which case it will appreciate through the rarity of coins and the value of copper. Either way, the intent of the work is satisfied while fulfilling the popular conception that "works of art increase in value over time."¹²

The value symbolized by *1,000,000 Pennies* is exchange value, not the moral value of work. It may have involved a lot of work to get the money together, but not labour in the sense in which it can be applied to the earlier paintings. Interestingly, Ferguson's authorship is not at stake; industrially-manufactured objects chosen by the artist have been part of the stock in trade of art since Duchamp's first ready-made. However, the authenticity won through self-denial in

the paintings is thrown, as it were, to the winds as the pennies fall to the floor. Dennis Young, writing about the new direction of Ferguson's work, observed:

it seems to be the one work that it is possible to make which conspicuously rejects the conditions of authenticity, uniqueness and scarcity necessary for a work of art to be relevant to a theory of commodities, while at the same time declaring an identity . . . as both a commodity (on the metals market) and a token of all commodities in the profane world.¹³

The formal configuration of *1,000,000 Pennies* is radically different from the rationalised economy of the paintings that preceded it. Indeed, although the history of minimal art is full of other examples of piles of various materials randomly arranged (for example, Robert Morris's *Untitled (254 pieces of felt)* in the collection of the National Gallery of Canada), in looking back at 1980 the arrangement seems precisely to symbolize the irrational forces of the economy driving the art market's rabid consumption of new art. It is not only the randomness but also the excessiveness of the million pennies that draws it into the irrational. From here it is not an impossible leap to the unconscious connections between money and shit theorized by psychoanalysis (and confirmed by popular expressions like "to drop a penny.") Unlike John Heartfield's famous montage of Hitler's belly full of coins, Ferguson maintains an ironic neutrality in his comments on the pile as an investment, but the lowly placement of the pile on the floor — a meaningful rejection of hierarchy in the superceded context of minimalist sculpture — reinforces associations with a digestive accident. Is the entrancing spectacle of the pennies therefore mere fetishistic illusion? *1,000,000 Pennies* suggests at the very least that as art approaches the status of a commodity, the autonomy from which came its critical authority is illusory.

Ferguson continued to address the problem of commodification, but as a painter the salient issue for him was the impact on painting of the return to the image, which only a decade or so earlier would have been viewed as retrogressive in high art circles but now provided ample sustenance for middlebrow appetites and had the blessings of the market. In a body of paintings called *Nova Scotia Landscapes*, made in the early eighties, he continued to question the authority of painting by adopting a new sort of template, the picture postcard. The views he chose were conventionalized depictions that owed their familiarity to nineteenth-century landscape painting, with titles like *Sun and Surf*, *Panoramic View* and *The South Shore*. To bring this association to the fore, "reconstituting its photographic dehydration,"¹⁴ he hired a painter in Saint John, New Brunswick, Gerard Collins, who did the actual execution of the paintings from rudimentary drawings that Ferguson had made on the canvases by projecting the postcard images. Collins's painterly style served the subject well. The resulting paintings, realized through an extensive series of mediating deferrals, have the lively immediacy of *plein air* painting.

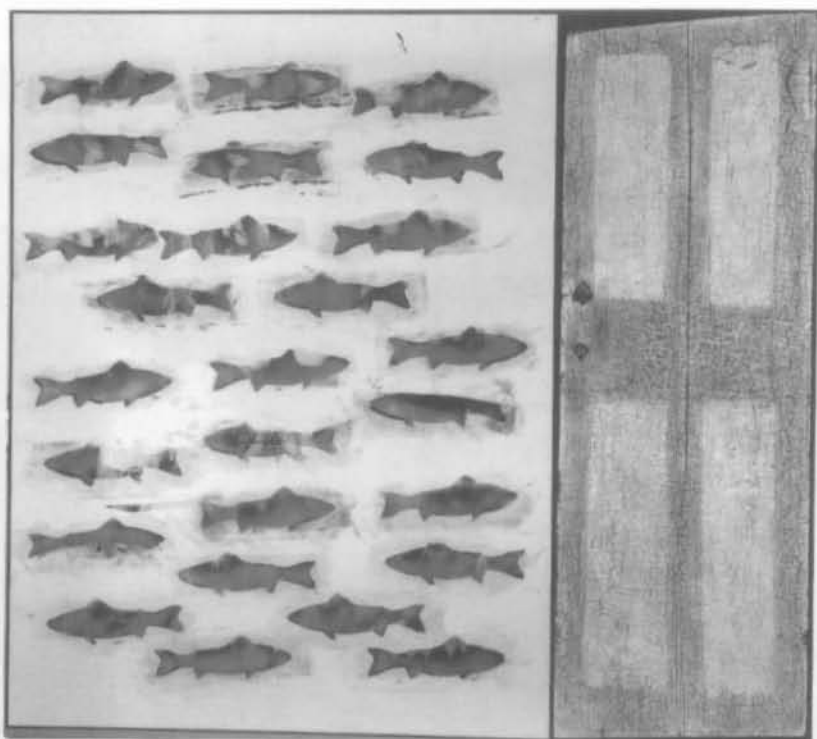


fig.5 Gerald Ferguson, *Fish and Door*, 1992, enamel on canvas, painted wood, 213 x 224 cm, coll. of Art Gallery of Nova Scotia. (Photo: Art Gallery of Nova Scotia)

The paintings become meaningful as one realizes they are not what they seem. Free self-expression turns out to be formulaic rehash; the valued touch of the painter belongs to another; nature imitates art because experience itself is subject to the mediation of conventions of seeing; conceptual art masquerades as *plein air* painting; and in spite of all this, the images prove capable of arousing emotion. As Ferguson observed drily, "You feel cheated — maybe even guilty — for liking them."¹⁵ It is the semblance of subjectivity that gives the paintings their critical force, opening up questions on the affirmations of the neo-expressionists. Their complex series of mediations become a way of undercutting any sense of "false immediacy."¹⁶ To use the terms of Adorno's negative dialectics, by inverting the "inverted world" of the commodity form, the paintings win their authenticity, even while being obviously inauthentic by ordinary criteria of authorship.

As successful as the landscapes were in terms of their critical intent (Ferguson went on to apply the same formula to postcard views of landscapes in

other parts of Canada, rendering the paintings specific to the location of several other exhibitions), the evidence of the work that followed suggests that having questioned the authority of the artist's hand, he needed to find a way of bridging the detachment he had imposed on himself, while still dealing critically with subject-matter. By adopting the methods of nineteenth-century "theorem painting" he was able to build a series of still-life paintings that combined stencilled motifs from local popular culture with quotations of still-lives by modern masters such as Cézanne and Picasso, as well as Marsden Hartley, an American painter whose work in Nova Scotia Ferguson had studied closely. The logic these paintings draw out of their multiple sources is that of the fragment, reinforced by stylistic dissonance. The hand of the artist is present, but it is and is not his hand. The paintings equivocate, gradually revealing the illusory nature of the pleasurable wholeness that they seem at first to offer. At the same time, they introduce a new symbolic complexity. Not only is the still-life the most artificial of painterly conventions, it is also quite literally of the past, a hollowed form bereft of its living contents. Where once it symbolized the organic continuity of humanity with nature, subject to the same cycles of growth and decline, in Ferguson's hands it is an allegory of the impossibility of such unity. The disintegration of the work, emptied of its former meaning, is the reason for the often remarked-upon ghostliness of these still-lives from the end of the eighties.¹⁷

Traces of History

In his article on Beethoven's late style, Adorno takes issue with the usual view that late style is marked by the uninhibited expression of subjectivity breaking free from formal constraints. Referring to the "expressionless," distanced character of Beethoven's late music, he states that "the formal law of late works, however, is, at the least, incapable of being subsumed under the concept of expression."¹⁸ He stresses the importance of conventions, which are no longer absorbed and transformed by the subjective dynamics of the music, as well as the fragmentation and sudden discontinuities that characterize the late style. For Adorno, it is the relationship of the conventions to subjectivity that constitutes the formal law from which the content of the late works emerges, a formal law that "is revealed precisely in the thought of death." However, mortal subjectivity cannot be the substance of the late work, as is often claimed: "Death is imposed only on created beings, not on works of art, and thus it has appeared in art only in a refracted mode, as allegory." Thus:

The power of subjectivity in the late works of art is the irascible gesture with which it takes leave of the works themselves. It breaks their bonds, not in order to express itself, but in order, expressionless, to cast off the appearance of art. Of the works themselves it leaves only fragments behind, and communicates itself, like a cipher, only through the blank spaces from which it has disengaged itself.¹⁹

Thoughts of mortality appear, too, to be on Gerald Ferguson's mind from the late eighties onward. They are manifest especially in the sense of loss that pervades his appropriations of vernacular Nova Scotian culture: the urn and wreath decoration of a firescreen, paired with a cod jig and two iron flowers of his own making, arranged in a diagonal cross that symbolically cancels out the fisherman's tool (*Neoclassical Still Life with Two Flowers and Cod Jig*, 1993); or the crazed and faded paint of an old door, out of true and knobless, a literal remembrance of time past placed next to a field of stencilled fish, half of them swimming away from it and the others swimming towards it as in *Fish and Door* (fig.5). They can be read, also, in the more oblique reference to time in a series of twelve canvases covered in a sea of black paint engulfing a school of stencilled fish, Roman numerals below them like paintings of the Stations of the Cross (*Times Roman*, 1993).

Coming after the deconstructive works of the eighties, these later works are surprisingly devoid of irony. They appear to emerge from a desire to express in his art the connection to place he lived in his day-to-day life. Ferguson has been an important collector of Nova Scotia folk art in his personal life, showing an outsider's awareness of the significance of this rich vernacular tradition; yet this is the first time he set himself to representing something of it in his own art. Perhaps his work on the two seasons Marsden Hartley spent in a Nova Scotia fishing village, which gave rise to powerfully symbolic paintings by the earlier artist, strongly inflected with love and respect for the people and their harsh but beautiful environment, suggested the possibility of a symbolic dimension in his own art.²⁰ Or perhaps the objects he incorporated into his paintings simply provided an objective correlative to the values of diligence and fitness he brought to his work. I do not know whether any of these explanations are correct. What is clearly communicated by the works themselves, however, is an understanding of the passage of time that is both retrospective and static, quite different from the sense of time as the duration of labour embodied in the early works. For all their metaphoric richness, there is a feeling of impasse here.

In his latest works, Ferguson has not so much removed but buried the overt symbolism of the pieces of the early nineties. For the hundred canvases of *1,000,000 Grapes*, he retains the stencilled reference to vernacular culture — the clusters of grapes that might have decorated a wall or piece of furniture. But in painting over them so many times he obscures their legibility and their origin. His repeated gesture cancels any immediate thematic potential and distances them from the constructed metaphors of the works of the early nineties. In so doing, he comes back to the abstraction of the dot paintings, via the *1,000,000 Pennies*. Like the pennies, the grape paintings are constructed from a logic of excess, the surplus paint all but obscuring the formal motif. In this way an intimation of the irrational force of the objective world that overwhelms subjectivity is permitted. However, their arrangement in a grid imposes an external order that

was absent in the pennies (although it is not a progressive order, but merely one that fills the room in a regular fashion, as the dots of paint had previously filled the canvas), so that an uneasy oscillation is created between order and disorder, or reason and emotion in the ensemble.

Blackness is the compelling fact of these paintings, and the mortuary symbolism of the colour is an undeniable aspect of late style in these works. In the context of Ferguson's oeuvre, black is the colour of restraint and an almost puritan refusal of pleasure, yet it has never been so absolute until now. One is reminded that, in the larger adjacent context of modernist painting, black — like white — is the colour of the absolute, a declaration of painting's autonomy and the separation of its logic from everyday reality. It is thus a sign of a late moment in the history of painting, marked not only by the end of representation but also by the subjugation of subjective expression to the objective order of painting itself.

Yet although one may understand these paintings as late works in a historical lineage of reductive painting, from Malevich to Reinhardt and beyond, the *1,000,000 Grapes* paintings are neither absolutely black nor absolutely abstract. The stencilled grapes, rendered in layer after layer of black paint, gleam here and there, flattened and desiccated, like crystalline fragments of coal that have lost all trace of their organic origin. Random spots of white canvas, missed by the roller, break up the blackness of the paintings and destroy their unity, allowing the contingent to re-enter them and, with it, the world. But these late paintings are devoid of melancholy and remote from the sweet sadness of the allegories of death in those that preceded them. They have not escaped from time. However, it is time stilled, caught in the grip of the inexorable rule of repetition, that is the law governing them. Like the musical conventions that "are no longer penetrated and mastered by subjectivity, but simply left to stand,"²¹ in Adorno's description of Beethoven's late music, repetition becomes the expressive substance of Ferguson's art, independent of his subjective will.

1,000,000 Grapes: the title establishes the finitude of the subject of the paintings. A first look confirms the objective ordering power of the grid. By a curious reversal, however, they provoke the deeper subjective experience of infinitude. Immersed in contemplation of their flickering blackness — literally, because the paintings fill the walls of the room — one understands them to be about limitlessness precisely because of the inability of the eyes to distinguish boundaries within them. The dissolution of the subject opens them to the imaginary, offering intimations of transcendence out of plain fact. Or, as Gerald Ferguson would say, allows "beauty through the back door."²²

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Notes

- 1 Theodor ADORNO, "Late Style in Beethoven," *Raritan* XIII, no. 1 (Summer 1993): 102.
- 2 Dennis YOUNG, "Gerald Ferguson: Task-Oriented Art," *Gerald Ferguson: Paintings* (Halifax: The Dalhousie Art Gallery, 1977), 8.
- 3 Cited in Gerald FERGUSON, "The 1968-1969 Works," *Dufour, Gary, Gerald Ferguson: The Initial Alphabet* (Vancouver: The Vancouver Art Gallery, 1994), 13.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 13.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 15.
- 6 Eric CAMERON, "System & Sensibility: The Art of Gerald Ferguson," *Studio International* 189, no. 974 (Mar/Apr 1975): 125.
- 7 Rose Rosengard SUBOTNIK, *Developing Variations: Style and Ideology in Western Music* (Minneapolis and Oxford: University of Minneapolis Press, 1991), 25.
- 8 Sherry Weber NICHOLSON, *Exact Imagination, Late Work: On Adorno's Aesthetics* (Cambridge, Mass and London: The MIT Press, 1997), 33. Nicholson is discussing an essay from 1930, "Reaction and Progress," in which Adorno is referring to the composer. I have taken the liberty of extending his comments from music to art in general.
- 9 FERGUSON, *Gerald Ferguson: The Initial Alphabet*, 15.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 11.
- 11 Nancy TOUSLEY, "Canadian Painting: Aspects of the 70s," *Vanguard* IX, nos. 5/6 (Summer 1980): 33. The article is a review of the exhibition *Canadian Painting in the Seventies* organized by the Glenbow Museum which included the work of nineteen painters, among them Gerald Ferguson.
- 12 Gerald Ferguson quoted in Jeffrey SPALDING, *1,000,000 Pennies: Gerald Ferguson* (Calgary: Glenbow Museum, 1980), n.p.
- 13 Dennis YOUNG, "Speculate to Appreciate," *Vanguard* XIII, no. 10 (Dec 1984/Jan 1985): 12.
- 14 Gerald Ferguson quoted in Linda MILROD, *Gerald Ferguson: Landscapes* (Saskatoon: Mendel Art Gallery, 1986), 6.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 10.
- 16 Stephen BRONNER, "Dialectics at a Standstill: A Methodological Inquiry into the Philosophy of Theodor W. Adorno," www.uta.edu/huma/illuminations/bron2.htm, p.3.
- 17 See, for example, Susan GIBSON GARVEY, "Degrees of Appropriation," *Uses of the Vernacular in Contemporary Nova Scotian Art* (Halifax: Dalhousie Art Gallery, 1994), 3.
- 18 Theodor ADORNO, "Late Style in Beethoven," 103.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 105.
- 20 Ferguson's research on this aspect of Marsden Hartley's career resulted in an exhibition at Mount Saint Vincent Art Gallery in Halifax and a publication with essays by him and two contributors as well as a selection of Hartley's writings. See Gerald FERGUSON, ed., *Marsden Hartley and Nova Scotia* (Halifax: Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery in association with The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and the Art Gallery of Ontario, 1987).
- 21 ADORNO, "Late Style in Beethoven," 106.
- 22 Gerald Ferguson, email communication with the author, 26 Jan. 2000.

LE DERNIER STYLE DANS L'ŒUVRE DE GERALD FERGUSON

Cet article est une analyse de l'œuvre de l'artiste de Halifax Gerald Ferguson fondée sur le concept de «dernier style» du philosophe et critique d'art de l'école de Francfort, Theodor W. Adorno. La première partie de l'article examine le dernier style en rapport avec la période du modernisme tardif auquel appartiennent les premières œuvres de Ferguson. Elle souligne les principales caractéristiques de son style, dont l'apparence impersonnelle est le résultat de l'usage qu'il fait de structures modulaires et de procédés systémiques typiques de l'art minimal et conceptuel. Plusieurs des premières œuvres sont étudiées en fonction des tensions entre cette esthétique mécaniste et rationaliste et la liberté subjective.

La deuxième partie de l'article identifie un changement dans l'œuvre de Ferguson parallèle au retour à la peinture figurative et à l'influence croissante, dans les années quatre-vingts, du marché de l'art qui remettait en question l'esthétique réductionniste du modernisme tardif. On voit que l'œuvre de Ferguson se dégage du souci de maintenir une perspective critique sur ces développements. Il abandonne ses procédés rationnels pour s'interroger sur les questions interreliées de l'authenticité, de la médiation de l'expérience et de la commercialisation de l'art. L'œuvre clé de cette période de transition est *1,000,000 Pennies*, un *ready-made* dont l'excès même aborde la question des valeurs artistiques par rapport à la valeur d'échange du produit.

La troisième partie de l'article examine l'évidence du dernier style dans les œuvres des années quatre-vingt-dix. Elle s'ouvre sur un exposé de la théorie d'Adorno sur le dernier style de Beethoven. Pour Adorno, la caractéristique principale du dernier style est une véritable loi qui se révèle par des pensées de mort. Cela fournit le contexte d'une discussion sur les tableaux allégoriques que Ferguson a peints au début des années quatre-vingt-dix, où les références à la perte et à la mort sont indirectement présentes. L'influence de la culture populaire de la Nouvelle-Écosse ainsi que des tableaux néo-écossais de Marsden Hartley sur ces œuvres métaphoriques inhabituelles est étudiée. On y montre cependant que le dernier style, dans le sens qu'Adorno lui donne, trouve sa pleine expression dans les cent toiles de la série *1,000,000 Grapes* que Ferguson a peintes entre 1996 et 1997. Ces œuvres tardives délaissent les allégories primitives de l'artiste pour présenter un symbolisme complexe, souterrain, qui dépend en partie du noir. L'artiste retourne aux procédés répétitifs des premières œuvres, mais remplace leur logique rationnelle par une logique de l'excès qui laisse place au désordre et à l'émotion. Ici,

la répétition ne symbolise pas seulement la durée du travail, comme dans les premières œuvres, mais le passage du temps en marche vers la mort. En dépit de la finitude que laissent supposer leurs titres, les tableaux appellent paradoxalement une expérience subjective de l'infinitude et laisse la beauté entrer par la porte de service.

Traduction: Élise Bonnette