

Littoral Practice: An Interview with Bruce Barber
by Don Simmons

Dematerializing an art object has its roots in the beginnings of conceptual art. With its temporal nature, media arts rose from this 1960's movement. Media art practices are not simply defined by the use of a video camera but it is contextualized by public access to video equipment. The practice parallels the expansion of choosing and creating one's own media that fits a given concept. Based in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Bruce Barber is an artist/ media theorist who has been framed by the conceptual movement in his early training but is not restricted by this recent history. Barber is an active littoralist, who manages to use history as a tool in to inform his present thinking and activities. Barber's most recent essay, *Paragraphs on Littoral Art (1997 augmented 2004)* was presented at the 2004 Alberta Media Arts Alliance conference in Grande Prairie. This interview/conversation occurred during the conference on May 23, 2004 and was transcribed later for publication.

Don Simmons: Could you describe what littoral art is and how it operates?

Bruce Barber: I'm pleased you asked that question. Littoral is a geographical term that describes the zone; it's a liminal zone, in-between zone, between the ocean and the land, which is covered at times by ocean and at times bare. So it's used as a trope, a metaphor to describe artists who work liminally, that is between the institution, museological gallery scene and the public sphere, using that term that the German social philosopher Habermas developed so brilliantly in many of his books and essays. So the artist may move back and forth between the gallery museum nexus and the public sphere that is the community or, local context. But it doesn't necessarily mean that artists disavow the gallery network for artist-run centres. In fact, they may work within those but move out into the community and back and forth. So it's a good organic term to describe an in-between zone.

DS: How is this any different than situational art where -- situational art works, operates, more within creating or distorting a situation in a community, but most of the situationists produce objects like films or actual artworks such as paintings, collages, assemblages, etc. How is littoral art any different than situational art?

BB: You're referring probably to the international group known as "The Situationists." and its famous members Guy Debord, Raoul Vaneigem and at least 100 other international artists of note who worked in various contexts throughout the late '50s, early '60s. And indeed, they were the first people to think of the context as being very important for the location of an artist's activities in the world. And you are right in, of course, acknowledging that they were subversive. Well, some littoral artists are also subversive in the same kind of manner. Conceptual artists and contextual artists of the '70s and '80s have also worked in the public sphere but not quite in the way that littoral artists have in terms of their focusing on concrete material, problems, community issues,

intervening in certain strategic ways to effect social change; in the sense that I've written about in my *Sentences on Littoral Art* invoking the famous maxim by Marx in his 11th Thesis on Feuerbach that -- and he was writing about philosophers - "philosophers have up till now only interpreted the world. The point is to change it".

And of course, my detournement, to use a situationist term, was to detourn (turn) Marx's statement and give it some more critical reflexivity with respect to the art institution which is to say that up till now artists have only really represented the world. They haven't, you know, engaged in changing it. They've just added to the core of representations that exist in the public sphere and that inevitably wind up in museums and galleries and that are bought and sold on the open market as commodities. The key point here is that an artist becomes a critical agent in society, working both on culture and social relations.

DS: As you say, a littoral artist doesn't have to be subversive, like the situationist. How would s/he not be if s/he's to engage with a community in an effective manner?

BB: I think he or she or they, as a group, should work self-reflexively. The way artists are trained in our society -- or have been trained up to now is based upon a very old model, which is about 400 years old; it's kind of a studio-based salon oriented. Well, if artists, if you take away that kind of competition element, the success-driven aggrandized rise to power, through whatever symbolic or actual means, people may have some kind of potential to live in a certain way that is critical, that is engaged with the family, their community, their friends, in such a way that they can construct themselves and develop an identity which is not capitulating to the stereotype of the artist as an autonomous, creative agent who works in a solitary fashion in his/her studio and produces works that are destined to the gallery, museum and the exchange system.

So perhaps it's not a difficult thing to understand, but here artists are not representing the institution art, as it has been constituted over the last half millennium with individuality and the absolute sense of the power of the creator being enshrined as a way of acting in the world. Artists can come to think of themselves as social agents, along with other social agents who have the power to both represent or act in the world in such a way that it might have some relevance socially; in such a way that you're not simply adding other objects to the world.

The '80s allowed artists like Tony Cragg and so on to recycle. But I'm not talking about recycling, you know; that's one way of thinking or acting in the world in that kind of critically or politically responsible manner, but littoral artists engage in research on the ground. They work together, then if necessary, against one another. Artists collaborating, sometimes up to groups of 10 or 12, not abnegating their own identities but recognizing that their identities may grow in the group, that there is a potential for change and that there would be a kind of a (60'ish) coming to consciousness, a conscientization which can occur in the framework of a group that can be politically very progressive and efficacious, that can lead direct change, both of the individuals who are involved and engaged in the littoral project, whatever it may be, but also the -- and in a sense, this is

very like The situationists' situation, that certain situationists set up where people are put together in one place and they become livers, not so much actors, but they live out the situation and realize the potential, the potentiality in the sense; that *im potentio*, which is what philosophers like Alain Badiou and Giorgio Agamben whose writing has been very influential; for example "The Coming Community," by Giorgio Agamben.

It's an ocean of means without ends. There's no -- not necessarily goal-driven directed, which is at the seat of the capitalist's enterprise that there must be a goal that must be achieved and that there's a hierarchy that has to be established and that there has to be power relations with ordinate, subordinate figures and roles distributed, division of labour, etcetera.

The situation, once it's researched, I'm thinking of, perhaps, the work of REPOHistory or WochenKlausur, Suzanne Lacy's work, Project Environment or the Israeli artist Avital Geva, among others you have potential for a wide range of activities to occur within a specific timeframe, which might be anything from a few days to weeks to months to years, and that this might lead to both changes on the ground and the local public sphere but also, broadly speaking, within the historical context that can influence and act to change the course of contemporary art practice in the new millennium, which, I think, is crucial when the world's resources are running out quickly. For example the oil crisis is upon us within the next ten years. Are we going to go to war to always solve our problems? These are crucial issues that up till now artists have only represented. They haven't acted. And do you have to go to war to act concretely? No, we don't.

DS: You talk very politically about art. When an artist or group becomes a medium for dialogue, in relation to the groups you mentioned, the idea of control comes up. Who is actually in control or in power --

BB: Or where they're going to get the money from to do this kind of work? (laughter)

DS: Well, not just the money, but it's when power is acting without intention, like you were talking about before, where --

BB: Where there's not goal-driven --

DS: There's no goal-driven by the artist. Does that make the practice and the actions entirely political, having little to do with art, except for the fact that an artist, who has produced artwork in the past, is involved in that action? Maybe it's just an artist who has an activist background or is interested in activism.

BB: Well, some non-artists can produce art, just as some artists can produce non-art, but the question with littoral practice, it doesn't have to be recognized instantly as an art object or art action in the world simply because artists have forfeited or authorized it or collaborated in order to produce it. For example, Suzanne Lacy is a famous artist, a Californian artist who is internationally recognized. Her project in the early '90s in

multiple cities throughout the U.S. she didn't even call art, but because she was an artist I guess other people have assigned it an art status, as I would, because it's both creative, it represents an extraordinary effort of individuals, where she considered this an art project on family violence. It took two years, several sites across the country, but involved wrecked cars and various sculptural installations which were framed with various statements. The cars were reconfigured by women and children who suffered violence at the hands of their family and loved ones; and according to what Lacy has said about this, women from domestic violence shelters in Pittsburgh, family violence programs from prisons, children from shelters and politicians in various communities all collaborated in making these cars a kind of a site for dialogue in a sense. They weren't art objects in the sense that Chamberlain squashed cars that are now in the Museum of Modern Art, but in some ways they refer to that history of Chamberlain's late minimal strategic intervention in the space of the museum by putting in squashed cars and making them look very aesthetic. That's something that the affichistes, lettrists or The Situationists who used their posturing and reposturing, their kind of interventions in 1968 also recognized that these actions in the world can be framed aesthetically. They can look beautiful in a certain way.

This is what Jean-Luc Godard in his films recognized as well. *Le Week End*, which is a critical indictment of American culture is also about the aesthetization of violence in Hollywood films. He knew that violence could be an aesthetic event. How do you critique that? How do you subvert it? Not simply by showing it but also by framing it in such a way that it allows people to in a kind of Brechtian manner be alienated by it, to come to -- through the "A" effect, in Brecht's terms, to become conscious of the extraordinary contradictions that exist in our understanding of violence in the real world and how we represent it.

And I think Lacy's work talks about that, whereas some other littoral groups -- and littoral is not simply synonymous with collaboration. There has to be onsite research, sometimes for weeks, sometimes years; there has to be a bounded timeframe, a temporal spatial frame around the subject of research; and then people have to intervene to go into this space and talk to people who are on the other side often, you know, politicians, people who are in institutions, that they're bounded and bonded by their bureaucracies and their collective agreements and their conventions of their authority, etcetera

DS: With Susan Lacy, she often uses the role, or plays the role, of a teacher or a therapist in much of her work when involving a group. Normally she facilitates some action with the people involved, however this is a willing group of participants, who want to be taught or so-called helped, right?

BB: Is this victim psychology that you're talking about?

DS: Well, a little --

BB: Suzanne doesn't step outside and say, okay, well, look, we'll go into that group, this group, that group. Sometimes she's invited in to work with people. She has a reputation for being an extraordinary teacher, a facilitator, but she also has an understanding that whatever she says, things may not go as she thinks they should.

DS: Yes, but she needs a willing group that is already on her side, in effect she's sort of preaching to be converted. It's similar to patting each other on the back or reassuring the group that everything is ok.

BB: I'm glad you said that because there's always that danger. But I can't speak on her behalf except to say that she's worked with some of the most intractable groups of individuals, people that she would not normally meet in everyday life. But she's gone there and she's listened to them. I think this is a very powerful strategic methodology of a good littoral artist. That they listen to their subj.... -- to the people -- I was going to say subjects, but the other agents in the littoral process, which is both dialogical in the Bakhtinian sense, it's heteroglossic and it's oddly enough, also communicative in the Habermasian sense, If we subscribe to his theory of communicative action, where once the parameter, the temporal spatial parameter, geographical parameter has been established for the process to proceed and the research has been done, that the littoral artist may, in fact, be surprised by the dialogue that they've set in motion, that, in fact, the results or whatever outcomes can only be arrived at through that communicative dialogue.

There has to be, in Habermas's sense, a *bindungseffekt* (binding) effect, and within speech act theory that's -- they can't be simply illocutionary acts, you do this, you do that, which is a kind of ordinate/subordinate control, power, power relation. It's the kind of power relation that families soon recognize they will never get anything out of their two-year-old if they say you do this. They negotiate or they bribe. Usually they bribe which is a not very positive way of handling the situation. But often they lead by example and they negotiate. Well, the same thing is true of how do you obtain the -- through the sensitivities that you have, how you obtain without coercion the respect and cooperation of your group? Well, they seek your support and cooperation but there is often reciprocity. That's why there's -- I call this -- perlocutionary which is derived from Austin's speech act theory where an act is performative and there's potential for an operative condition to occur, but there's also a sense that things may not go exactly as they're planned, just as when someone gives a gift and they expect it to be reciprocated but often it's not. And very often it's not. In fact, some people don't expect to be reciprocated when they give a gift but secretly in their head they think, hmmm, I gave that person something, why are they not giving it back to me, tit for tat, that kind of thing. The tit for tat is also the basis of wars. And if you see the wonderful animated film by one of Canada's great animators Norman McLaren's *Neighbours*, where what starts out as a simple matter of where -- is that flower on my side of the property or your side? And the two neighbours put up a fence and soon they're destroying each other's families and houses.

DS: There's a nature of giving in littoral art, like a donative practice, however giving is a really complicated thing where artists --

BB: Yes, things may not go exactly as has been intended.

DS: Yes, but I mean no doubt you can give something and not expect something in return, but you can make the person you gave it to really suspicious. Why did this person give it to me? It's not always generous or selfless.

BB: Have you seen that little film *Pay Forward*? It's one of the films. It demonstrates that if you give selflessly, that gift may go on giving through others. So -- and this is at the basis of various religious ethics as well or ethics that the notion in Protestantism that, if you keep on giving, that you will be accorded a place in The Hereafter. Now, littoral artists don't, at least the ones that I correspond with and spend time with at various conferences over the last ten years, don't necessarily think in those terms. You know, they don't think in terms of through their giving, through their donative practices, you know, they will necessarily find a place in the HereAfter. (Laughter) That's just not on the agenda as far as they're concerned. But they do have very strong feelings, sometimes anger, about the situation in the world today.

DS: Part of littoral art is like being a missionary where someone, an artist, is dropped into a community, and attempts to solve a current problem. Is being a littoralist any different than a missionary?

BB: Absolutely! Because most missionaries, part of the kind of neocolonial or colonial exercise, were transplanted out of their community, say Britain, at the turn of the 19th century, and were sent and their vocation was to change the Native's way of thinking. And littoral artists never go in with that expectation. They never see themselves as being transplanted from one -- in fact, they're more likely to operate in their own backyard and in their own family and in their own community, their arts community or their own educational community, whatever. And, you know, that old religious axiom "charity begins at home", well, charity does begin at home for many littoral artists. But if they're invited to go some place else-- because they're politically conscious animals, in a sense, littoral artists are very dangerous because they're conscious of the relations of power that are exercised both in the art world and geo-politically around the world. So they get -- they're very critical of neocolonial incursions or practices that re-enforce existing power relations between individuals, between groups and communities and also between countries. So I think that if a littoral artist is so naïve to think they can be transported to, as I have to Poland or to Australia without doing some preliminary research, without talking to anybody when they arrive there, without learning the language, and indeed some missionaries are also like that. Some missionaries learned the language, some missionaries, the most successful of missionaries exported their whole family and their whole community to the neocolonial context and stay there for there for their whole lives. Just think for example about how India was colonized or how Australia and New Zealand were colonized. Some of the results were very negative from that, and we know that,

those imperial adventures were extracting resources, extracting spices, gold, whale oil and other natural resources, etc. It was very prohibitive to the building of equity and democracy in most countries around the world and its taken years to eradicate some of the problems that were instituted by the messianic zeal of neocolonialist agents in the Third World.

Littoral artists who are engaged in a process of changing the world of the micro level, the local level, and sometimes beyond that, don't go in with any messianic sense that they're going to come out the other side with a positive result. Sometimes the positive result is the production of difference to the assignment of value where prior to that there was no value.

Think of WochenKlausur. When they were invited by some individuals to go to Italy to a small town and the only thing they did there was they encouraged people to produce a mural and to build a bocchia court for the old people. A very small intervention with some amazing results. They could have gone in there and said the problem here is that the major urban centres are extracting all the young people. You know, the same problem besets many places in Canada.

Going down the road in Cape Breton, the people that immigrate out of that part of Nova Scotia don't return sometimes for 20 or 30 years and what is happening there? That between 5 to 10, to 25, 30 percent unemployment, and in some cases, 50 percent unemployment, which has been the problem in both Cape Breton and Newfoundland for the last three generations -- well, in Newfoundland since Confederation, even with all of the oil resources. Well, the conservative argument is that you give the provinces the oil resources and so on and let the provinces dictate where their resourced money should be spent. But then you forget about the state, you forget about the country's social services and you forget about universality of health care and so on and so forth. So what is for the betterment of the whole should be privileged over what is for the betterment of individual provinces or individual -- you know, this is how families operate, why shouldn't the whole state operate like that?

DS: You wrote in your essay that littoral practice may indict both objectivists and rationalists ethics. Could you explain this, to be clearer?

BB: Okay, this is shorthand for -- you know, I started writing this essay many years ago and I put it aside partly because I produced sentences on littoral art were successful as many who read them, found them to be concise. And also I wrote not paragraphs but essays on littoralist art practice and communicative action where I established very clearly, I thought, what littoralist practice was about. Other theorists such as my colleague Grant Kester have also written essays, as has Wolfgang Zinggl of Wochenklausur. We often refer to each other's essays. Grant Kester wrote a very famous piece "Dialogical Aesthetics" that's been published in many places and he has edited a book on oppositional art practice. He argues that instead of communicative action, most littoral artists engage in what he terms dialogical aesthetics. We have supported one

another's endeavours and we refer to both forms of... perhaps it's distinct genres of littoral practice that we're talking about, just as in the 70s, there were distinct genres of conceptual art.

Now, ethics: whenever you move in the public sphere and work outside of the studio, some would argue even within the studio, there's an ethical -- the part of being human is defining or determining what is ethical behaviour as opposed to unethical behaviour? Is it unethical to move or presume to have some knowledge of another community when we're not of that community? Some would say yes, indeed that is, that you shouldn't move into an Aboriginal community unless you're of that community.

A few hundred years of Aboriginal exploitation and subordination would tend to support that theory that they're being termed the victims because of do-Gooding exercises on the part of people who thought that they were ethically superior and who knew what was in the best interests of Aboriginals in various communities, both in Canada and in other parts of the world. And of course we've seen what that's led to. It's led to discrimination and oppression and subordination and to the total alienation of various social groups within this system

So littoral artists have to be self-reflexively critical in the first instance of what they're engaged in. That's why research has to be paramount and that's why they should have ethics uppermost in their minds whenever they either intervene or define a parameter around some subject or activity which they're engaged in, attempting to understand, comprehend in the first instance, but also to engage in a dialogue.

When WochenKlausur went to Zurich to deal with the problem of "homelessness," the first thing they did was talk to the people who were dealing with that problem or who thought they were dealing with that problem. And they didn't go to their offices, to their bureaus, and say okay, we want to talk to you about the problem of homelessness, and these people, these agents, political agents and so on; perhaps ethically that would have made sense, perhaps, because they didn't want to alienate the people that were in control of the situation. What did they do? They went and asked these representatives of the state, invited them to join them on a boat ride, to take the police force, the local politicians, the local social service agencies, the people in the medical professions, they put them all together, away from their bureaucratic institutionalized legitimization, in the Habermasian sense, into a new context. And these people, some of them had never met one another. They didn't know that they existed. They put them all together on a boat and they didn't tell them what they should be doing, they just let them talk. They let them talk. That's the dialogical process. And what happened? They talked. They hadn't -- they didn't have the opportunity to even meet one another on a regular basis because they were so busy protecting their bureaucratic self-interests.

What happens when you put people from various bureaus that are protected by the walls and the doors and the secretaries and so on, you pull them out of there and you put them together? Most politicians are scared out of their wits when they have to meet with the local police chief and the local fire chief, with the local prostitute, the prostitutes I mean

the sex workers union, and the trade union workers. They don't like to deal with that. They don't want to meet them directly. They want a mediator. They want someone else to be there before they talk to them.

So what's ethically more responsible, to get back to your question, what is ethically possible under those conditions? Well, we only understand ethics, good ethics from unethical. We have bad ethics. You only understand the good from the bad. If we had a measure of -- sometimes bad stuff can be good. Sometimes unethical stuff can actually -- sometimes when you think of the Watergate tapes, those guys were, in terms of reporters digging stuff out of their, you know, they were unethical not to, perhaps, arguably, to disclose who their insider contact was ... (laughter) and that brought down a whole government!

The same is true of Seymour Hersch's discussion of the My Lai massacre images. Was it unethical for him to write about those images and to do the research into Lieutenant Calley and his gang who went out there?

And the same is true of the Iraq images that are coming out. Is it unethical for the government to keep a lid on those? Or is it ethically responsible for the people in the media -- one of the important ethical instruments, apparatuses of the circle of democratic state is the media. But the media is also tied by its institutional directives and characteristics.

DS: And political agendas.

BB: And political agendas! And yeah, I was trying to -- ethical, ethics has potential inasmuch as action has a potential, inasmuch as any individual singularity is always potentially multiple.

DS: In relation to the idea of multiples of multiples or being an individual in a part of a larger community, is set theory always a part of littoral art?

BB: Yes. And I'm glad you asked that because set theory is the basis of a lot of mathematical paradigms for economic theory, sometimes positively, sometimes negatively.

But when Cantor developed his set theory, which was subsequently elaborated by other mathematicians and was used by philosophers like Alain Badiou most recently or Agamben to talk about potentiality and "whatever", in Agamben's sense, that whatever has a good function, that whatever -- and the possibility of the individual singular can only be understood by multiple -- That, in fact, this is enshrined in mathematical laws, Not the single and the multiple but the single/ multiple. The absolute singular is always - - can only be understood, comprehended with the multiple.

DS: And one of many or --

BB: One of many --

DS: Like a chain reaction?

BB: That's potential. Agamben argues in *The Coming Community* that is the whatever. And he describes it in different languages using many different resources, both within old scriptures, old Latin text and so on. And this is what Badiou and some of his colleagues who are survivors from the 1968 barricades, also argue. There was, in fact, some benefit from that failed revolution in terms of French political consciousness. It became a true republic in 1968, democracy was shored up in 1968 and that the French, who are inclined to build the barricades into the streets whenever they feel that there's an injustice, felt that some changes were necessary. And some very important changes did happen, not only in France but all around the world post 1968. Education was no longer the same. Education had to change, just as education in the new millennium, I think, also has to change and recognize some important facets of the modalities of life in -- as it is lived in the 21st century.

DS: Littoral art tends to be performative in nature, with the intent of taking action in a community. What happens when an artist gets in trouble and events become more severe? No doubt an action can be naïve, and it's important to research and educate yourself before doing something with a community. What if you are surprised with a negative reaction or complication?

BB: Some things go wrong. Not necessarily as a result internally of the action or the -- but the local level of what the artist, littoral or otherwise, has done, but how it's perceived by the outside world.

For example, you may be referring to the Critical Art Ensemble the bomb scare in Halifax. Well, not only artists get caught up in this problem. And in the post 9/11 world, security conscious paranoia, it's possible to just wearing the wrong shoes onto the plane going to the United States you can precipitate a crisis, a crisis in security, and this is -- you know, the security budget as opposed Canada to the United States is horrendous to secure their homeland. As a result of 9/11, they've had to foreclose on the individual liberties that we always thought we had with a democratic society.

What does that mean? It means that artists can no longer act freely, not only artists moreover but no one can any longer act freely. You know, the whole concept of libertinism just doesn't make sense in the post 9/11 world, just as poetry for Adorno didn't make sense in the post Auschwitz world. And these are, you know, extremes, but I think any artist who now decides that intervening means that you have to put black boxes in a clandestine fashion anywhere in the culture is asking for potential negative responses and if not criminal indictment and military action against them.

DS: This relates to taking responsibility, if you are an artist going into a community.

BB: At the very least. The research should include a period of acquiescence in order to understand what the potential results of an action or intervention may be.

But if communicative action is truly communicative and, you know, dialogical esthetics, to use Grant Kester's term, is truly dialogical, then those potentials are considered through the process. And they can be -- any potentially negative results would be understood before they were -- before they occur.

I know that didn't happen in Halifax because, in part, there may have been - I'm using "may" here - there may have been a sense on the part of the participants that they were doing something that was a little edgy in the good old avant-garde activist, antagonist, agonist sense that Renato Poggioli discussed in his book *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*.

Well, a littoral artist doesn't attempt to act in that standard historically ordained, art historically ordained and respected avant-garde tradition because they're speaking to one another. They're speaking to the people that -- they're speaking to the police force and they're speaking to the -- you know, the people in the medical profession. And they're like the great documentary film maker Frederick Wiseman going in and in some ways, doing the research but in a sense being good listeners and open to dialogue, and they can say well, do you mean this or do you -- they're engaged anthropologists in another sense. They're -- without necessarily having any anthropological training, but they've learned from participant observation methodologies that have been adopted and enshrined within ethnography for the past 50 years. And anthropologists are sometimes wrong.

But, someone going in naïvely into Iraq to think that they can be doing good right now by getting people from various communities, for example the former minority Bath ruling party with the Kurds and the majority Shiites and so on, to talk to one another. The question is how would an artist work in that country? Well, an artist might have to work simply by being an observer. An observer in the sense that they may, have to talk to people before they can observe them, then they have to get their permission before they can document them or talk to them and record them. And they should be in the best, you know, news gathering or documentary sense, they should be impartial. How can they be impartial when they can see what's wrong?

DS: That gets back to the idea of a set theory of multiples of multiples, with regards to something illegal happening or where the police are involved. People who have opposing points of view are a part of the open dialogue as well.

BB: And some people will resist change to the death, and you have to be aware of that. Some people are not going to change their religious or ideological, philosophical beliefs without a fight, without a struggle. So do you engage them in that struggle? You can learn from it. You can learn from it.

This is what *im potentia* means. That you can learn the differences may be the only result, that the multiplicity may be the only result and that you're not going to change history or the injustices of history overnight. There's no way that -- otherwise your utopian idealist native position, you know, tricks the -- or you're an autocrat and a fascist who thinks that they can right the wrongs over the last 100 years and they'll end up putting in place exactly what shouldn't have been put in place through their actions.

DS: I wanted to ask you a couple of questions related to the title of your essay, *Paragraphs on Littoral Art* and its reference to an article called *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art* written by Sol LeWitt in *Artforum*, July 1967.

Why did you parallel littoral with conceptual?

BB: I have enormous respect for Sol LeWitt, and in some crucial senses I was trained as a conceptual artist. I was trained during that period in the late '60s and when I read this, it was the gospel of truth, you know, but when I was reading it ten years later the art world changed, and the '80s was an extraordinary time to be producing art because everybody was engaged in thinking "big is better", that it had to be destined to the museum. Think of, you know, any number of artist's work huge photo prints -- I was producing some of them myself and I thought well, they are probably all destined for the museum because domestic wall space is limited. But that's not always the case.

But it seemed to me that conceptual art, and littoral art I see as development from conceptual and contextual art. In some senses, it brings together contextual and conceptual even though we don't necessarily like any of these labels together.

And Sol LeWitt identified through his critical intervention...parodic subversion of minimal art. It was conceptual.

His *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art* were published in *ArtForum* at the same time that Robert Morris and Robert Smithson were writing about minimal art, process, entropy and objecthood. And I think Sol LeWitt, being somewhat strategic and humourous, was trying to challenge their positions to assert that he was a conceptual artist. He was thinking of primarily the primacy of the idea of the concept over the process. But once you had the concept, the process followed as a direct result of the concept.

Well, I think once you introduce the notion that nothing exists in the world independent of the social reality, material and social economic material reality of which we are a part, suddenly there is a matrix, a very dense matrix of socioeconomic, political, ideological concerns that inevitably become available for our purview and potentially our understanding. If we don't consider ourselves to be victims of ideology and potential agents in our own self-knowledge and if we sense that things aren't all right in the world and that we have a potential as intelligent actors; the worse thing is an intelligent artist because they think they're free and they think that they have an option to change things because the art history has given them that license.

And I think that my gentle detournement , because I acknowledge it both through reproducing the title “Paragraphs on” art that I substituted “Littoral,” “Conceptual,” “Sentences on” art, but substitute “Littoral” for “Conceptual,” in a sense to be, you know, if you are going to be -- if you really wanted to be cynical about it, you could say it’s just another strategic move in the art world to obtain symbolic power, whatever.

But I think there’s a real sea change that has happened in the last 15 years, part of which I think I have been part of. I’m speaking with a certain amount of familiarity here, but there are many artists who are recognized and that the art world has not offered them any potential for acting in the world beyond a certain prescribed notion of what it means to be a successful artist which is about having your work framed the right way, literally and metaphorically; to have it accrue in symbolic and economic value; and to have it lodged in some kind of museum where it’s going to sit on a shelf or on a wall or whatever.

And I think media artists are artists who collaborate with one another, and this is not unusual. Writers are usually fairly solitary figures. People used to think that painters were also but one of the things that Duchamp taught us, one of the many things is that artists never work alone. The painter doesn’t make the canvass, you know, doesn’t make the paint that the painter works with, doesn’t make the brushes and doesn’t necessarily frame their work after it’s completed.

So to go back to your question, I have an enormous respect for Sol LeWitt and his work. We are of different generation. And those Sentences and Paragraphs on Conceptual Art were a critique of minimal art. In a sense, my critique is not a critique so much as an extension of conceptual art into the social contextual arena. With my understanding, as a thinking artist of my generation, the work of Jan Zwizdinski, Herve Fischer and others who promulgated a contextual art is an important historical prototype, as well as those artists such as Art and Language, John Stezacker , John Latham, Suzanne Lacy who investaged the public sphere. The Littoral nexus includes many groups such as Group Material, Artlink, Wochenklausur, Dogs of Heaven, Cultural Transmissions Network, Burobert, Grupo Escombros, Hirsch Farm project, Platform, Progetto Cuspide; Projects Environment, Protoplast, TEA, Terra Cultural Research Society, REPOhistory. The Internet has given us some amazing opportunity for networking, getting work out there, bypassing the traditional institutional routes.

DS: Littoral art coming out of conceptual and contextual art, is related to the dematerialization of the art object.

BB: Yes. Some people have termed it “post visual” art. In my essays I’ve always reinforced the notion that there are very strong visual elements, sometimes very conventionally beautiful elements in littoral art practice. And littoral artists are often -- they’re not avant-gardists who necessarily want to burn the past in the traditional activist sense. It’s oppositional but it’s also work that fits within a historical sequence.

DS: A littoral artist is open to change. Similar to how conceptual art in the 1960's, which engaged dematerialization, has changed into a collectors' market where any sort of remnant from that time has been transformed into a commodity. Acquiring has a real economy to concepts. All things change.

BB: It's possible but not likely that this would happen with littoral art. It would just simply be commoditized in a fashion that all of the documentary evidence of Fluxus, for example, which also began with a kind of a social edge to it, political. And conceptual art, we know what happened to Earth art, we know what happened with Arte Povera, those objects, those artifacts are now in museums.

Because littoral is multifaceted and much of it is communicative, very little of the process may have a material artifact to behold and in this sense it may be post visual and/or post aesthetic. I don't necessarily think that that's true because it was strong evidence, and there is photo documentation on the web of all of these works, and some of the artists have ended up in the Venice Biennale. In fact, nearly half the Venice Biennale. May of the Utopia stations at last years Biennale could be characterized as forms of Littoral practice. But some of it was certainly not littoral in the exemplary sense that I've attempted to interpret it, discuss it, analyze it, theorize it in my essays. See <http://www.novelsquat.com/index2.html>

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