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“What if daily life in Canada is boring?”

: Contextualizing Greg Curnoe’s Regionalism

by Dot Tuer

In December 1988, I met Jamelie Hassan and Ron Benner in Cuba, where they were organizing an exhibition of London Regionalist artists and I was attending the Cuban Film Festival. That year Perestroika was at its height: the street lamps still worked; the buses ran. Havana was abuzz with a generation of artists whose work had matured with the revolution, engaging conceptual strategies that explored Cuba’s daily life, both official and illicit. The Hotel Nacional, where I stayed in the centre of Havana, was hosting a troop of Soviet factory workers rewarded for their productivity with a week’s vacation on America’s only Communist island. The workers, who never left the hotel, began their day with early morning swims in the frigid pool and ended it with late night drinking bouts in the hotel bar. I was a little more adventurous, alternating film watching with long walks through old Havana and free-fall intellectual discussions with Cuban artists that lasted late into the tropical night.

Down the street from the Hotel Nacional, the London Regionalist artists from Canada were exhibiting at La Casa de Las Americas, a centre whose publishing programs, art shows and library had been a major political and cultural reference for Latin Americans since the revolution. The poster for the exhibition featured Greg Curnoe’s map of the Americas. Based on a work by André Breton, Curnoe’s map excised the United States from standard cartography, conjoining Canada and Mexico as neighbours to fuse Canadian nationalism with a north/south re-orientation. In the gallery, beside one of Murray Favro’s sculptural bicycles, hung a large letter-stamp painting by Curnoe. It read:

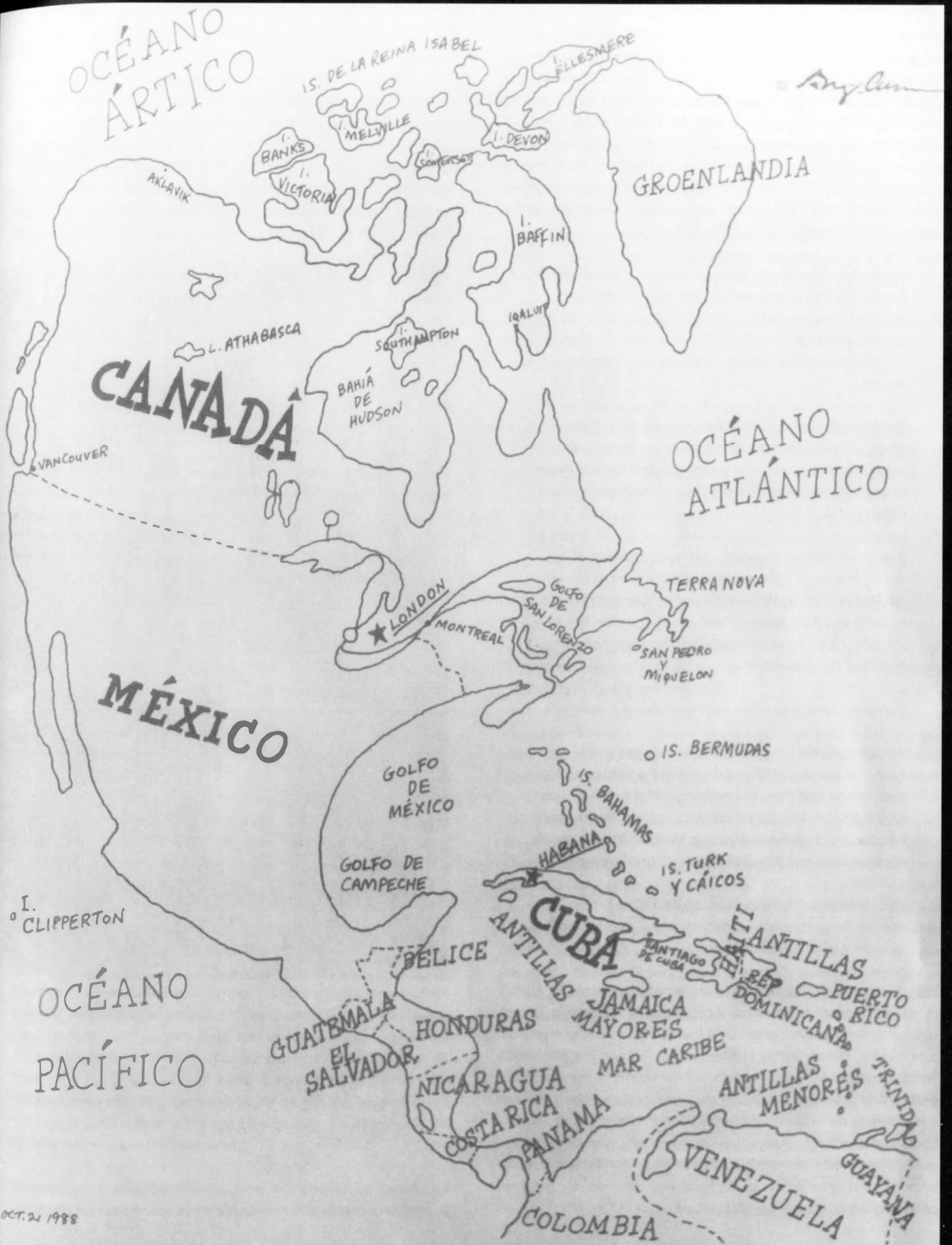
“What if daily life in Canada is boring?
and what if I am not aware of what is
interesting to others about my life?”

In 1992, Greg Curnoe died when hit from behind by a truck while bicycling. At that time, Cuba was entering what is euphemistically known as the “Special Period.” With the political disintegration of the Soviet Union, Cuba experienced severe economic deprivation. The Soviet Union was Cuba’s major trading partner, in which the exchange of sugar for oil and massive subsidies had enabled Cuba to guarantee its citizens basic food and shelter and to build the best health care and education system in the developing

world. Without oil, the buses no longer ran; the street lamps didn’t work; there was no gasoline for the American vintage cars that Cubans had kept running since the revolution in 1959. To get around, Cubans began to use bicycles, chaotically careening through the dark city streets. In retrospect, I can’t help thinking that Curnoe would have loved the sight of this local adaptation to global isolation.

In 2001, when I asked to participate in a panel entitled “Regionalism and Internationalism” for a symposium on Greg Curnoe, his map from the Havana exhibition was the first thing that came to mind. Since my encounter with Curnoe’s remapping of the Americas, I had discovered another artwork that also questioned the dominance of the United States over the continent. Forty years before Curnoe, Joaquín Torres-García, an artist from the Rioplatense region of Uruguay, created a map in which he inverted the poles to place the southern cone at the top of the world. I had always wanted to show these two maps together, and they became my cultural signposts for the panel text reproduced below. Although I never met Greg Curnoe, it seemed fitting to the theme of the panel that the first time I saw his work internationally was in Cuba, before the fall of the Berlin Wall, NAFTA, FTAA, G8 summits and a corporate platform for global integration.

I would like to address the questions of regionalism and internationalism — questions that in an era of globalization, depending on your perspective, appear either to loom enormously or to fade into irrelevance — with two maps of the Americas. In one the United States is missing; in the other, the north and south poles are



Map of North America, Greg Curnoe, 1988, Spanish version produced for the exhibition poster for the Casa de las Américas, Havana, Cuba, printed in pink ink without exhibition text, based on original ink drawing of Map of North America, 1972. Courtesy of Archives of Ron Benner and Jamelie Hassan.

inverted. Greg Curnoe made the first map in 1972 for a cover of the *Journal of Canadian Fiction*; Joaquín Torres-García made the second in 1935 to illustrate a manifesto. The manifesto, "School of the South," was issued by Torres-García upon his return home to Montevideo from Europe after a forty-three-year absence. He was sixty years old and searching for a regional reality that would anchor his art to the everyday and the concrete. In the following excerpts from his 1935 manifesto, one can hear many echoes of Curnoe's commitment in another era and another country to the same artistic exploration of local life and practice:

There should be no North for us, except in opposition to our south. That is why we turn the map upside down, and now we know what our true position is, and not the way the rest of the world would like to have it.... This is a necessary rectification; so that now we know where we are.

Our city, the one we live in, has nothing to do with any other ... looking closely, we discover the inner character of everything because our people are not like those of any other city; they have as much character as the city itself.

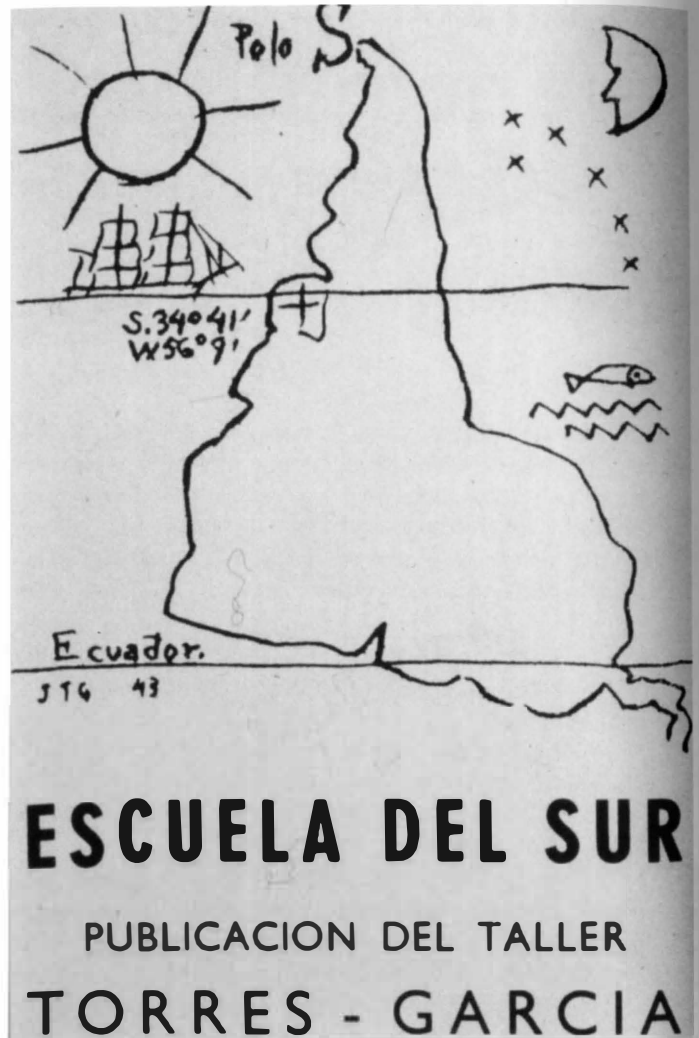
If we move onto what we call expression, choice of words, the angle from which things are seen, etc., we also find ourselves in the presence of something very marked and particular. So that just by listening to people talk, we begin to penetrate into the idiosyncratic nature of this population.

Our geographical position then indicates our destiny.

We can do everything (now I'm referring to the vital things, those we call telluric, that give the right aspect to everything); and then, not exchange what belongs to us for the foreign, but, on the contrary, convert the foreign into our own substance. Because I believe that the epoch of colonialism and importation is over, and so away!

Well, then, what is the artist to do and what is he doing? He must remain conscious of the world without forgetting what is close at hand.'

With this manifesto, Torres-García anchored his passion for his art in an affirmation of the local that, much like Curnoe's, railed against a staid provincialism and the dominance of foreign culture. Sadly, Torres-García's attempt to influence the provincial Rioplatense public, with its penchant for imported European art and post-Impressionist landscapes, was a failure during his lifetime. Despite an outpouring of work, and the founding of a workshop and local art association, many artists and most of the public were indifferent to his insistence that a fundamental reorientation and valorization of the local was essential for the creation of a living, breathing, vital culture.



Escuela del Sur (School of the South), Joaquín Torres-García, 1935. Courtesy of Dot Tuer.

In 1989, Greg Curnoe published his Blue Book #8, in which he listed a negative topology of all the things he was not. Together with names of family members, First Nations' peoples, avant-gardist movements and twentieth century "isms," Curnoe declared that he was not a Rioplatense. He was, however, an artist and a catalyst who shared with Torres-García what Pierre Théberge described in his 1982 National Gallery retrospective of Curnoe's work as "an ideology of time and place."² During his years as a practising artist, Curnoe rarely left London, Ontario, making his immediate surroundings his object of study. Torres-García, on the other hand, had spent forty-three years away from the city he would embrace toward the end of his life as the conceptual centre of his artistic practice. Yet despite their differences of context and geography and circumstance, both envisioned an art in which experience anchored observation. Later in their lives, both sought out an indigenous history to answer Northrop Frye's famous question, "Where is here?" Torres-García embraced the spiritual framework of the Inca empire; Curnoe excavated the traces of a First Nations presence in the environs of London.

In their passion for the local and the specific, their recognition of indigenous history as "the underpinning of culture"³ and their redrawing of conceptual boundaries of reception through strategies of inversion, Torres-García and Curnoe offer a genealogy of regionalism and internationalism that is markedly different from the global erasure of the local that frames a contemporary "new internationalism" in art, in which the numbing sameness of international Biennials feature artists who come from different parts of the world but whose work is readable due to the uniform adoption of an international style. In linking these two artists, I would propose another kind of internationalism, one that is not hemmed in by the mythology of national unity nor unhinged by a fluid transmigration of ideas and artists but framed by the dynamics of local cultures marking a time and place to communicate across time and place.

If we isolate Curnoe as a Canadian artist who championed the regional in his idiosyncratic attachment to everyday life, then his work becomes marked by the singularities of history. He becomes a nationalist whose ideas were swept away by a wave of globalization, an artist whose commitment to the local has come and gone with the vagaries of art world fashion. If, on the other hand, Curnoe's work is viewed in a context that is transnational and embedded in questions of colonization and culture that mark the historical legacies of the Americas, then his artwork affirms the possibility of envisioning a dialogue that engages regionalism beyond its national boundaries. Greg Curnoe was no ideologue, and there is much to pick fault with in terms of his intellectual framework if one so wishes. He also claims in his Blue Book #8 that he is not a utopian. Yet there is something utopian in his insistence on affirming the regional, finding in the local, like the famous Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges, an Aleph, a small sphere that revealed the universe.⁴

Torres-García was dismissed during his lifetime as a utopian dreamer; his contribution to constructivism was at best a footnote in

European art history. However, in recent decades, Latin American artists from many countries have revisited his work and ideas; his notion of the local has been reflected upon and rethought within a contemporary artistic context. Curnoe's artistic legacy at this moment does not reach beyond Canadian borders; his work has not merited even a footnote in the current writing of international art history. In response to this lack of recognition, I hope that we can begin to reflect upon and rethink the legacy of Curnoe's commitment to the regional as something more than the sum of its parts, and in so doing envision regionalism as a model for art and life that reaches beyond a particular time and place to give us a concrete sense of an internationalism specific to the Americas.

Borges, who wrote a great deal about the region in which he was born and lived, made an interesting argument about Buenos Aires and its environs, declaring that:

There are no legends in this land and not a single ghost walks through our streets. This is our disgrace. Our lived reality is grandiose yet the life of our imagination is paltry.... Buenos Aires is now more than a city, it is a country, and we must find the poetry, the music, the painting, the religion, and the metaphysics appropriate to its greatness. That is the size of my hope and I invite you all to become gods to work for its fulfillment.⁵

Now Curnoe was certainly an imperfect God, yet in his own milieu he was a larger-than-life figure, dedicated to finding the ghosts that walk through our streets, and to creating a language for our history that would, in Borges' words, "bequeath an illusionary yesterday to men's memory."⁶

An earlier version of this text was presented at the day long symposium "We Are Not Greg Curnoe", May 12, 2001 at the Art Gallery of Ontario in conjunction with the exhibition Greg Curnoe: Life & Stuff.

Dot Tuer is a writer and cultural historian whose work addresses issues of postcolonialism, art, and technology. She is a professor at the Ontario College of Art and Design, and a frequent guest lecturer. Currently, she is finishing a doctoral thesis at the University of Toronto which examines how the clash of world views between European and indigenous peoples in the colonial Americas have shaped modern ideas of nature and culture. Most recently, she received a Canada Council Senior Artist's Grant to begin research on a book that will bring this examination of nature and culture to a discussion on contemporary Canadian art.

Notes

- 1 A translation of Joaquín Torres-García's manifesto can be found in Dawn Ades, *Art in Latin America* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), pp. 320-322.
- 2 Pierre Théberge, *Greg Curnoe* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1982), p. 9.
- 3 Greg Curnoe, *Deeds/Abstracts* (London, Ontario: Brick Books, 1995), p. 25.
- 4 "The Aleph," by Jorge Luis Borges, is the story of a mysterious sphere located in a cellar of a Buenos Aires house in which one can see the infinity of consciousness and the eternity of the universe. *The Aleph and Other Stories: 1933-1969* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970).
- 5 Cited in Beatriz Sarlo, *Jorge Luis Borges: A Writer on the Edge* (London & New York: Verso, 1993), p. 20.
- 6 Cited in Sarlo, p. 23.