

Industrial Images / Images industrielles

Rosemary DONEGAN

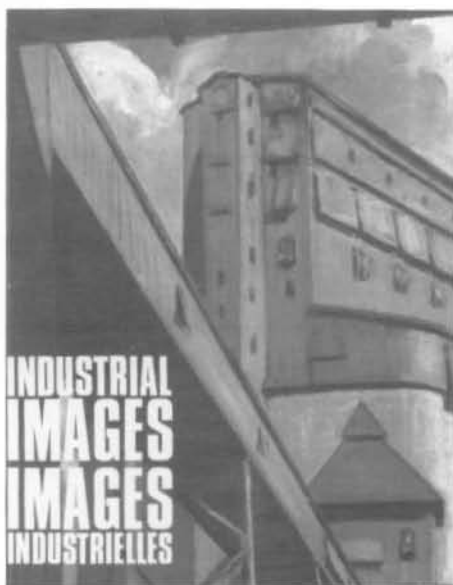
Art Gallery of Hamilton, 1987

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It is an understatement to say that industrial themes have been ignored by art historians. With the exceptions of Francis Klingender's classic *Art and the Industrial Revolution* (1947) and a handful of other works (mostly monographs), one would be hard-pressed to identify any significant contributions to the subject. This attitude has not been so generally true of the artists themselves, some of whom (such as Charles Sheeler and Adrien Hébert) owe much of their popularity and historical importance to their interests in the formal, the narrative or the psychological implications of industrial or production-related subjects.

The self-conscious stance adopted by many art historians toward industrial subjects derives from various sources. Not the least of these is a hierarchizing of subjects deemed appropriate to the fine arts (despairingly reminiscent of the strictures imposed by seventeenth-century academies of art), as well as the suspicion (so much a part of Modernism) of narrative content in art. The contemporary interest in narrative and figuration, as well as the increased emphasis on the social production of culture in general and the arts in particular, makes this a propitious time for a re-evaluation of industrial imagery. A significant step in that direction is Rosemary Donegan's *Industrial Images* exhibition at the Art Gallery of Hamilton (toured) and its accompanying catalogue, whose footnotes reveal the critical shortage of earlier Canadian studies on this theme.

Donegan apparently has a strong interest in the urban context. Her previous book was *Spadina Avenue* (Vancouver/Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 1985), based on an exhibition at A Space. There, Donegan presented an extensive selection of photographs of Spadina



Avenue. They were chosen and juxtaposed to introduce some of the themes, such as labour relations, that were subsequently explored in *Industrial Images*. However, *Spadina Avenue* was organized on a block-by-block basis, ending at the intersection of Spadina and Bloor and thus imparting to the book a clear sense of continuity and development over geographical space. The organization of *Industrial Images* entails more problems. The latter book studies Canadian images of industry and labour from c. 1900 to c. 1950, and consists of six chapters, five of which are devoted to specific provinces or regions: the Maritimes, Québec, Ontario, the Prairies, and British Columbia. The sixth chapter constitutes a brief history of the changing promotional techniques and types of imagery favoured by Canadian industry during the period.

There is much to recommend such an approach, notably the very different industries and their degrees of development and prosperity in different parts of Canada. It would seem futile in a study of this sort to deny the essentially regionalist character of the country. How-

ever, Donegan's approach does imply certain disadvantages. Fifty years of Canadian history is infinitely more complex than one hundred years of Spadina Avenue history. For one thing, Donegan's methodology militates against any clear overall *chronological* overview. Each chapter tends to become a discrete unit. The chapters recapitulate the same fifty years of history, the concerns and parameters of each stopping at provincial borders. Nor does Donegan's organization of the catalogue facilitate a highly-developed *thematic* reading of the text. Themes such as shipping, factory work and labour disputes recur from chapter to chapter, usually without many points of continuity or divergence being drawn between the treatment of the same themes at different times and in different places.

Donegan clearly recognized the dangers which her geography-based format entailed; her introduction and her final chapter offer two alternative organizational approaches. In the introduction, she identifies certain factors such as the development of the assembly line, the entrance of large numbers of women into the work force, the growth of the consumer society, and so on, which have affected the symbolism of industrial imagery in Canada and elsewhere. Her second (but related) alternative approach, tracing the history of changing promotional techniques and types of imagery used by industry, is given in Chapter 6. These range from popular Victorian decorative conventions (such as cherubs) to underline the ideas of industry, work and prosperity; through to an emphasis on the concepts of speed and attractive lifestyles during the 1920's; and finally to the use of clearly "artistic" promotional images, commissioned by industry from noted artists in the years following the Second World War.

This is not to suggest that organizing the main body of the catalogue along chronological or thematic (rather than geographical) lines would necessarily solve the types of problems

noted earlier. Indeed, it would probably result in a text that would seem disjointed and glib in its examination of the minutiae of regional divisions. As it is, there will be inevitable complaints that certain industries and areas of the country have received too short shrift from Donegan, while others have received too much attention. Donegan herself recognized the validity of many complaints. "Unfortunately," she wrote, "because of research and space limitations, the exhibition cannot be totally comprehensive, though it attempts to convey some sense of variety and breadth of industrial imagery in Canada." (page xii). It is all too easy to poke holes in studies which, given their pioneering status, are necessarily wide-ranging and which lack the luxury of having a basis in earlier studies on which to ground their methodologies.

The breadth of scope in this catalogue also allows for a significant choice of title: *Industrial Images* rather than (for example) *Industrial Imagery in Art*. Many of the objects used by the author to illustrate her argument have traditionally fallen outside the bounds of "fine" art. Most notable here are such things as union buttons, ribbons and charters. This all-inclusiveness makes for some revealing juxtapositions when (*inter alia*) commissioned posters of happy, hearty workers are seen in conjunction with photographs of labour marches. In addition, Donegan tends to treat "fine" art images less in terms of traditional, medium-bound criticism, and more in terms of getting behind the colour, composition and chiaroscuro, in search of the artists' interests in documentation or social commentary. This is nowhere more clearly expressed than in her description of Harry Orenstein's *Self-Portrait as Fur Worker* (illustrated in colour on the back cover of the catalogue):

...Orenstein's *Self-Portrait as Fur Worker* (1948-49)... is a highly unusual composition, with a remarkable strength and visual inten-

sity. The painting is focused on the point where the two disks [of the sewing machine] meet the needle as it passes back and forth, sewing the two-inch fur strips together as they are fed into the machine. In the background, the cutters, blockers, and finishers are shown at work. Orenstein constructed a flattened space in which the perspective of the worker/artist becomes the viewer's, and the mental concentration demanded by the task is the actual theme of the painting. The artist's personal experience as a fur worker on Spadina Avenue is apparent, especially in his depiction of the actual hand movements. (p.60)

Self-Portrait as Fur Worker shows Orenstein seated and at work, but the vantage point is directly above his head, looking straight down. Donegan focuses on how images that are intentionally exciting in a formalist sense can also tell the viewer about actual working conditions and procedures. This does much to tie together the otherwise disparate types of objects used in the exhibition and in the catalogue. Yet, for all her interest in their importance as documentation in social history, Donegan does accord a special status to the "fine" arts. She premises many of her arguments about the ideological underpinnings of the making of industrial images, not on photographs and union paraphernalia, but on sculptures, paintings and prints. The catalogue includes typical examples of work by more than three dozen painters, sculptors and printmakers, including Miller Brittain, Franklin Carmichael, Emily Carr, Lionel LeMoine FitzGerald, Lawren S. Harris, Adrien Hébert, E.J. Hughes, C.W. Jefferys (not, as in the catalogue, "Jeffreys"), Jean-Paul Lemieux, Alfred Pellan, George Agnew Reid, and Philip Surrey. The "fine" arts "have been able to retain a spontaneity, a breadth of expression, and a critical edge that have eluded the more derivative applied arts" (page xii).

In view of that remark, it comes as no surprise to discover that one of the author's stated

aims is to explore such issues as the impact on industrial imagery of the abstraction-oriented approach to art that came to maturity during the first half of this century. "Canadian artists," Donegan writes, "saw abstraction as a visual reaction and embodiment of contemporary industrial life," and she quotes Walter Abell (from 1943) to this effect. The reader is then left to wonder why there are so few examples of abstract work in the exhibition and catalogue. They do include a painting by Alfred Pellan, two by Fritz Brandtner, and one by Stanley Brunst that could reasonably be termed "abstract," but little else of this type is included. Other examples could be cited if one extended "abstract" to include the incorporation of modernist elements in such works as the murals of Charles Comfort, for example, although the basic syntax of such art is essentially realist. Donegan's proposal for an examination of the role of abstraction in the depiction of the industrial scene is an exciting and important one, but it is not developed in her text. The geographical ordering of the catalogue frustrates the author's attempts in this direction. Donegan has written a five-part history of industry and industrial relations in Canada. She has relied on imagery as her primary source material, but the catalogue remains primarily a work of critical social history rather than of the applicability of different artistic styles to specific subjects.

A more successful performance on the relationship between the documentary and critical functions of "fine" art is based on artists' engagement with the ideologies of utopianism and the picturesque in many industrial images.¹ Here, too, the geographical ordering of the catalogue abbreviates and fragments the discussion given to this idea, but not to the extent that was true of Donegan's comments on the relationship between abstraction, realism and industrial subject matter. The process of coming to terms with the fact that much

industrial imagery tends to evoke sentimental reactions inappropriate to actual conditions has been a *leitmotif* of recent collections of industrial photography in particular. To her credit, Donegan has absorbed the lessons of these works, and deals concisely with the issue of the central role of government and business in the creation of an industrial imagery (in the form of murals, advertising campaigns, logos and billboards) that is loaded with an artificially utopian view of industrial conditions. She is at her best in her discussion of Charles Comfort's murals in the Toronto Stock Exchange. They are described in terms of the validation they give to the power of modern industrialization, based on capitalist economic theory, to recover from the Depression.

Donegan also realizes that machinery can be approached by the artist not only in cold documentary terms, but also as still life, as portraiture, as metaphor, or as allegory. She therefore includes references to the implications of the frequent de-emphasis in works of art of the functions and significance of industrial equipment in favour of many artists' preferences for highlighting picturesque qualities. Her selection of Grant Gates' sentimental 1940's and 1950's STELCO photographs was a particularly good one in this regard, and other fine examples in the catalogue could also be cited. In her coverage of the conditions of patronage and of artists' leanings toward the picturesque and sentimental Donegan demonstrates that the documentation of the industrial image has, ironically, been culpable in the very falsifying of the image of industry to which it might have been expected to be opposed.

It is with these factors in mind that the reader comes to a clearer understanding of why, despite her stated belief that painting and sculpture are inherently more expressive and expansive than "the more derivative applied arts," the author has included so much material (like union buttons) that might at first seem

ephemeral and distracting to her main argument. As has been seen, Donegan relies upon "fine" art examples to bring out the ideologies at the root of much industrial imagery. But she also implicitly contends that we cannot acquire a balanced view of industrial imagery by referring only to painting and sculpture, which may tend to romanticize and isolate their subjects. A union banner, in its beribboned pride and self-conscious sense of community, might tell more about the reality of being an industrial labourer in the 1930's than can many examples of "fine" art (often commissioned or produced by individuals having little shop floor experience), even if that banner lacks some of "fine" art's most desirable attributes. To return to the example of the Toronto Stock Exchange murals, Donegan has pointed out elsewhere that they "are not concerned with the social or economic effects of industrialization, the slums, the unemployed or the tedium of industrial labour, but with the idea of scientific logic and a belief in progress."²

In general, though, the greatest strengths of this catalogue are not to be found primarily in its *analyses* of formal or ideological questions, but rather in Donegan's careful historical *documentation* and (re)writing of labour history on the basis of its imagery. This approach to labour history is laudable and much-needed. The mythologies that have grown up around twentieth-century Canadian art have encouraged the idea that Canada is best defined in terms of a lack of any sort of human habitation at all, let alone the presence of large-scale industrialization. Insofar as Donegan is intent upon challenging the continued dominance over the Canadian imagination of the Group of Seven and such Québec regionalists as Clarence Gagnon, she is performing a valuable service. Furthermore, as she herself points out (page x), the Canadian trade union movement lacks a strong visual history. There are specific sectors of the Canadian industrial milieu (such as the auto-

mobile industry) where there is a puzzling lack of visual documentation, and the private-property nature of most factories has limited the number of artists permitted to record their activity. It is surely apposite that in the United States, where the national ethos has usually been defined in terms of bustle and industry rather than lakes and trees, there has not been a comparable shortage of critical examinations of the representation of technology and industry. In Canada, such a study has long been lacking.

Much work remains to be done on the various aspects of the visual documentation of industry in Canada. These range from analyses of precisionist fascination with the intricacies of mechanical forms to studies of representations of the impact of industry on society in general and the labourer in particular. Possible first impressions notwithstanding, the catalogue's inclusions, exclusions, emphases and juxtapositions have been chosen to provide as strong an overview of the problems and potentialities of the subject as could reasonably be expected in a study of this length. The single significant short-

coming is the conflict between the geographical organization of the text, and the development of theories arising from issues of style and intention in the arts. *Industrial images*, like all seminal texts, leaves much unsaid and only outlines much else. But its subject is as wide-ranging as it is relatively unexplored. Rosemary Donegan's research has provided a solid and broad basis on which to build more specialized and detailed studies.

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Notes

1 Very methodologically useful for its discussion of how artists and writers slotted a specific image of technological progress into a picturesque mode is Merrill SCHLEIER's *The Skyscraper in American Art, 1890-1931* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1986).

2 Rosemary DONEGAN, "Mural Roots: Charles Comfort and the Toronto Stock Exchange," *Canadian Art* (Summer 1987): 69.