The collection of articles in this special issue of RACAR is devoted to the theme of Idea in art. It expands upon a session on the same topic held at the October 2010 UAAC conference, which took place at the University of Guelph in Ontario.

Mindful that the notion of conceptual art is not so new as it might appear, and that artists did not wait until the last century to affirm the essential character of concept, Idea, or thought at the matrix of the artistic process, the organizers of the original session aimed at most to elucidate a few of the landmarks of a long history, one almost identical to that of the history of art history. Since the appearance of the concept of disegno in the sixteenth century in art theory’s infancy, Idea in art has undergone a number of modifications—from the birth of aesthetics in the eighteenth century, to the nineteenth-century Aesthetic Movement, and then ultimately to contemporary redefinitions of art. It seemed reasonable then to ask whether these most recent avatars of Idea in art truly initiate a new history or whether they remain nevertheless dependent on a genealogy which they ceaselessly reinscribe.

This question is addressed variously in the seven analyses assembled here, which consider Idea in the art and writings of Benvenuto Cellini, Federico Zuccaro, Nicolas Poussin, John Everett Millais, James McNeil Whistler, Max Liebermann, Barnett Newman, Joseph Kosuth, and a number of other artists, to say nothing of the work of the numerous art historians, critics, and philosophers mentioned in this dossier.

These few circumstantial remarks, completed by the presentations of their authors and the summaries of their contributions, might suffice to introduce this series of studies, were each limited to illustrating a well-known theme wherein the stakes were clear and distinct. But this is not the case. For of what Idea is it a question and of what art? Why do these two words appear to say nothing of the work of the numerous art historians, critics, and philosophers mentioned in this dossier.

During the Renaissance, on the contrary, a metamorphosed concept of Idea contributed to the birth of art theory, as Erwin Panofsky demonstrated in Idea. His celebrated, now canonical, essay establishes multifariously the unifying thread of the collection of articles presented in this special issue. The fact that this period also witnessed a return of neoplatonism in the writings of certain authors variously connected to the world of art has fostered the belief that Early Modern art and its theorizing were inconceivable from any other point of view, though logically the neoplatonic position precludes the philosophizing and theorizing of art. Several of the studies gathered here demonstrate that this is far from the case, and that the introduction of Idea into art—beginning specifically in the sixteenth century, but persisting into the age of classicism—can only be understood on the condition that one sets aside neoplatonic judgments, as the articles touching on Cellini, Zuccaro, and Poussin and Fréart suggest. Ultimately, Platonic Idea does not emerge unscathed from its successive attempts to introduce itself into art and art theory: rebaptizing Idea as disegno makes it possible for art to infiltrate Idea and transform it, instead of the reverse.

This reversal, in actuality inevitable given the original incompatibility of Idea and art, intensifies throughout the nineteenth century as is shown in the articles on Lady Elizabeth Eastlake and on the German painter and theorist Max Liebermann. Art continues to assert its autonomy and to withstand the invasive introduction of Idea, whether by affirming the qualities proper and intrinsic to painting in the face of sermonizing and arbitrary criticism in the first instance, or in the second by...
avoiding, through a new synthesis of the imagination, the conflict in which idealism and nationalism sought to enclose it. In both cases it is definitely art that in fact ends up absorbing Idea, which had first sought to impose its domination by intruding where it did not belong.

In the case of modernism, conceptual works which speak resolutely of and for themselves, those of Beauséjour and Kosuth for example, resist similarly efforts to inject Idea into art. All this nevertheless takes place as though Idea and drawing, as the confrontation of Greenberg with Panofsky reveals, retained a scarcely tapped prestige that art needed to appropriate by claiming its autonomy, obtaining its emancipation, or coming of age, as though ultimately art history were also nothing other than the history of gestures of resistance to Idea, whose hold art loosens only by eluding, subverting, and circumventing its intrusive partner.