

Dennis Reid and Matthew Teitelbaum, eds, *Greg Curnoe: Life and Stuff*. Toronto and Vancouver, Art Gallery of Ontario and Douglas and McIntyre, 2001, 207 pp., 6 half-tone illus., 54 black-and-white illus., and 57 colour illus., \$75.00 Cdn

The late artist Greg Curnoe (1936–1992) is said to have made no distinction between his life and his artistic production. Known for his devotion to his family and friends, and admired for his intense regional loyalty to his hometown of London, Ontario, Curnoe claimed that art could only be valid if it reflected his lived experiences. His outgoing personality, distinctive work and willingness to engage in stimulating verbal debates with his large circle of friends and peers contributed to his reputation as a colourful and gregarious individual. Scornful of art theory and disdainful of the claims of universality for international styles of art, Curnoe became known for his matter-of-fact, down-to-earth attitude. The view of Curnoe as a common man whose cultural production was inseparably joined to his life developed very early in his career and continues to exert considerable authority with critics of his work. Curnoe's persona as an artistic "everyman" is sustained primarily through the insistent use of the biographical narrative, which effectively acts as a barrier to a more critical, theoretical reading of his work.

In the spring of 2001 the Art Gallery of Ontario organized a large retrospective exhibition of Curnoe's work. The exhibition, *Greg Curnoe: Life and Stuff*, celebrated the deposition of Curnoe's archive at the AGO, along with the donation of a significant body of his work (more than 160 works were either purchased by the gallery or donated by his family). A splendidly glossy book of the same name was published concomitantly with the exhibition. Ambitiously billed as the "first book-length study of the vibrant work and life"<sup>1</sup> of the artist, *Greg Curnoe Life and Stuff* was intended to "coincide" with the retrospective rather than function as a standard exhibition catalogue. While it is an attractive and entertaining book that purports to give the reader an intimate glimpse into Curnoe's life, from an academic perspective it is a disappointment.

At the time of the publication, almost ten years had elapsed since Curnoe's accidental death in 1992. He has not been forgotten in the meantime; instead, the intervening years have given writers time to look back over Curnoe's life and to consider what his death means to the world of Canadian art. In the foreword to *Greg Curnoe: Life and Stuff*, the director of the Art Gallery of Ontario, Matthew Teitelbaum, writes that the publication is "a cause for reflection on achievement, and celebration of a life" (p. 7). The passage of time has also allowed Curnoe's persona to develop to near-mythic proportions. *Greg Curnoe: Life and Stuff* functions as an extension of Curnoe's "life and stuff" – it echoes his artistic production while reinforcing the most significant aspects of his distinctive persona.

Edited by the AGO's chief curator, Dennis Reid, and Matthew Teitelbaum, the book consists of two essays, an extensive chronology, and a bibliography which includes an exhibition history. Sarah Milroy, an art critic and writer, is the author of the main essay; Curnoe's personal friend, Dennis Reid, contributed a second, shorter essay; and Judith Rodgers, Chief Curator Emerita at the London Regional Art and Historical Museum, compiled both the chronology and bibliography.

The design of the book is consistent with Curnoe's style. One of its most pleasing features is its visual presentation; from a fuchsia frontispiece to a bright green and yellow dustjacket, the book's visual aspect pays playful tribute to Curnoe's affinity for colour. Simply laid out in an easy-to-follow format, the design harmoniously mirrors Curnoe's aesthetic. Equally notable are the lavish colour reproductions of a selection of works from the exhibition, which are augmented by numerous archival photographs of Curnoe's life. (Unfortunately, because the book was published in conjunction with the AGO exhibition, it only includes reproductions of works that are in the AGO's own collection. This means that there are a number of significant works by Curnoe from other collections, both public and private, that are not reproduced in this book, although works such as the Victoria Hospital series and the Dorval Airport mural are mentioned in the text.) An overwhelming portion of Curnoe's work features material from his everyday experience, and the inclusion of visual evidence of the people and places that feature in his art, combined with the biographical narrative, gives the reader the feeling that they know him better. This impression is solidified further by the two essays.

Sarah Milroy's "Time Machines" is the longest and most comprehensive of the two essays. A well-integrated mixture of biographical detail, anecdotal remembrance and visual analysis, Milroy structures her portrait of Curnoe around the theme of time, one of the artist's overriding concerns. The theme aptly reflects Curnoe's lifelong preoccupation with chronicling his immediate experiences. The temporal motif also structures Milroy's essay, as she traces Curnoe's life and artistic production from his birth to his death.

As Milroy notes in her essay, Curnoe was an inveterate maker of lists and collector, compulsively detailing the minutiae of his life in an attempt to impose order in a potentially chaotic world. He detailed his life in a myriad of ways – creating written lists on scraps of paper and in school scribbles, painstakingly chronicling events in more formal journals, incorporating lists into his work, and collecting groups of objects such as rubber stamps, pop bottles and buttons. Milroy plays on Curnoe's obsession, noting how, from the vantage point of his studio, she has been taking inventory of the objects he collected (in short, she is listing his lists). Like Curnoe, she takes the immediate moment as her main reference, from which point she casts a

reflective eye back over his life. Drawing the reader's attention to a number of salient details, the events and episodes that Milroy highlights help to present a particularly human impression of Curnoe that is consistent with how he portrayed himself during his lifetime. Throughout his life Curnoe took an active role in the construction of his persona. Aware of the influence that his forceful personality had on the public, he contributed much of the material that was later used by writers. For the most part, Curnoe's persona was established fairly early in his career; by the late 1960s a particular picture of him was consistently presented in the media, significantly assisted through his own efforts.

One of the most popular narratives invoked to define Curnoe was his childhood attraction to non-traditional forms of art. Milroy takes care to link Curnoe's youthful interests in, for example, comic books, rubber-stamping and journal keeping to his mature artistic production. (Curnoe himself brought attention to his early interest in comics in a 1975 exhibition catalogue: "My whole background in drawing comes out of comic books and children's books with captions under the pictures. To draw or paint an object or place without words was too much of a handicap."<sup>2</sup>)

Accompanying Milroy's linear narrative is a plethora of anecdotal evidence. Milroy conducted extensive interviews with Curnoe's peers and friends, who eagerly supplied many stories that help to support Curnoe's reputation as a down-to-earth, no-nonsense "everyman" with a rebellious streak. While the use of anecdote is not a scholarly method, it is an extremely effective way to romanticize a biographical subject. Judiciously selected anecdotes may also be used to heroicize the artist. Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz write: "Anecdotes have ... been repeatedly used as sources in the writing of history"; while seemingly unimportant, anecdotes can "occasionally convey something significant about their hero, and very often provide a deeper insight into his personality than other sources."<sup>3</sup> Although they generally appear to be authentic reminiscences, anecdotes and stories are usually employed for a particular purpose. Natalie Zemon Davis notes: "Stories set up a special space for themselves with their 'once upon a time.' They are an economical instrument for making a point, for striking a blow ..."<sup>4</sup> It is worth considering what the writer's motive may be in relying so heavily on anecdote. A good deal of the appeal of Curnoe's work depends on the ability of the audience to connect with his art on a personal level, as some of his works are so specific that they require extra-textual information to be understood. By reinforcing Curnoe's persona through supporting witnesses, as it were, anecdotes may help to popularize his art by "explaining" it.

Within the limitations inherent in biography, Milroy's essay provides a competent biographical study of Curnoe, as she traces his career over his lifetime. She also includes a description

of his key works, weaving them seamlessly into the biographical narrative, reinforcing the idea that his life and art were inseparable. In doing so she mentions many of the things that mattered to him most – his friends and family, his commitment to regionalism and art, his interest in competitive bicycling, his anti-Americanism, and so on. In addition to this, Milroy chronicles the fluctuations of his career, positioning Curnoe not as an artistic genius who had untrammelled success, but presenting a populist view of Curnoe as a hardworking "everyman" who succeeded through his own efforts and persistence.

Milroy is unwilling (or unable) to separate Curnoe's life from his cultural production, and her essay is primarily a chronological narrative of Curnoe's life that reinforces his established persona. The heavy reliance on biography, however, precludes any other point of view besides the artist's self-representation. Although Milroy's interpretation of Curnoe's art verges at times on the psychobiographical, as she probes incidents from the artist's life to explain his cultural production, she shies away from any overt theoretical stance. It is important to ask why so many writers appear so reluctant to question the biographical narrative.

Dennis Reid's essay, "Some Things I Learned From Greg Curnoe," is structured around the themes of friendship and remembrance. His contribution is much more personal in tone than Milroy's essay and does not venture into any theoretical territory either; instead, it functions as a posthumous tribute to the longtime friendship and working relationship the two men shared.

Reid played an important part in the early stages of Curnoe's career, working with the artist from 1967 onwards. He describes some of the highlights of their association such as his selection of Curnoe for the 1969 São Paulo Bienale.<sup>5</sup> He discusses in some detail their collaboration on the exhibition catalogue for the Bienale, a work that solidified both Curnoe's reputation and his "everyman" persona. In a self-deprecating manner, Reid chooses to downplay his role in Curnoe's career in this essay, focusing instead on what he himself gained from their association. He traces his professional development alongside Curnoe's rise to fame, contending that it was his interaction with Curnoe that shaped his own career and life. Reid's humility merits a more thorough investigation; while it pays homage to his friendship with Curnoe, it masks the inevitable power hierarchy between curator and artist. It also raises questions about the kind of art history that may be written by "friends" of the artist.

Reid tentatively alludes to the problems inherent in a relationship between curator and artist. He describes how their professional lives had drifted apart by the 1970s, when Reid assumed the role of curator of historical Canadian art at the National Gallery of Canada. Despite this shift, the two contin-

ued to engage in intellectual debates for the rest of Curnoe's life, although there were periods when their contact was sporadic and their friendship lay fallow. (At one point, in light of a critical review that Curnoe wrote about Reid's work, Reid wonders if their relationship was not essentially professional.) Ultimately, Reid's essay is as much about Reid's own professional development and personal growth as it is about Curnoe.

In the lengthy chronology that follows the two essays, Judith Rodgers highlights what she considers to be the most significant events of Curnoe's life and career; beginning with Curnoe's birth on 19 November 1936, the chronology spans over six decades, extending beyond his death to September 2000. The events that Rodgers selects are a mixture of personal and professional occurrences that appear to be neutral and therefore unbiased. This is not the case, however; while she presents an engaging portrait of Curnoe, Rodgers's chronology is a careful compendium of information that sustains and reinforces his persona (as Milroy's and Reid's essays also did). Rodgers's approach, particularly her plentiful use of material from Curnoe's archive, helps to romanticize the artist, and reinforce the image of him as a man inseparably joined to his art. This image is made explicit in her choice of an opening quotation by Marcel Duchamp: "I thought that you could make a work of art of your life, or at least you could live your life as a work of art" (p. 137). (The choice of this quotation also helps to elevate Curnoe's professional status by equating him with Duchamp, one of the most famous twentieth-century avant-garde artists.)

Rodgers consistently selects entries that reinforce the idea that Curnoe possessed innate artistic talent. She focuses on Curnoe's early art education, mentioning in particular the influence that the teachers at H.B. Beal Technical and Commercial High School had on Curnoe. Rodgers also details Curnoe's numerous artistic successes – his many artistic awards, the acquisition of some of his key works by major institutions, and his frequent exhibitions. Her chronology is much more than a catalogue of his professional influences and achievements, though; she also focuses on his private life.

Rodgers highlights the important role that Curnoe's personal attachments played in his life. In the chronology she includes a number of significant moments from his private life such as his meeting with Sheila Thompson, the woman he would later marry, and the subsequent births of their three children. The deaths of various people close to Curnoe, such as his parents, Jack Chambers and Selwyn Dewdney, are also mentioned. The wealth of factual information is augmented by a huge amount of supplemental material primarily from Curnoe's archive. Excerpts from his personal correspondence and journals, bits of newspaper reviews, and interviews with his friends and colleagues, together with a number of black-and-white

photographs illustrating various aspects of his life, are interspersed throughout the chronology.

Curnoe was not a simple individual, and part of his persona was premised on his quixotic nature. In the chronology Rodgers portrays him as a complex, contradictory artist, traits consistently associated with the temperament of an artistic genius. Long touted as an independently minded art-school dropout (she includes several quotes that demonstrate Curnoe's ambivalent feelings about his years at the Ontario College of Art), Rodgers points out that Curnoe went on to teach at the very institution that rejected him. She also notes how Curnoe was posthumously celebrated by the college, which set up a bursary in his name shortly after his death. This information indicates that, despite the ups and downs of his career, Curnoe finally received some of the recognition that was due to him, and the posthumous vindication of his talent also may make readers feel that their affinity for his work is likewise vindicated.

For the academic researcher, Judith Rodgers's chronology and bibliography provide valuable information that help to situate Curnoe's career along the time-line of his life. Likewise, the biographical details supplied in the two essays are interesting, particularly Milroy's birth-to-death synopsis of Curnoe's life. There is, however, an inordinate amount of repetition within the book's text (both Milroy and Reid mention a number of the same events and works in their essays, which are then restated further in Rodgers's chronology), giving the reader a disorienting feeling that they are revisiting Curnoe's life several times over, albeit from slightly different perspectives. There are also technical shortcomings in the book; it desperately needs both an index and a list of illustrations for easier reference. Aside from these technical and editorial complaints, *Greg Curnoe: Life and Stuff* is most disappointing because none of the authors question the firmly entrenched view of Curnoe. Perhaps this phenomenon could have been averted had the editors chosen to have at least one essay that focused on a theoretical re-examination of Curnoe's work, and less on his biography.

Critical theory is conspicuously absent in *Greg Curnoe: Life and Stuff*. I believe that this is due, in no small part, to the widespread awareness of Curnoe's disdain of art theory (he often likened art theory to a "performance" that art writers put on for each other). His adamant refusal to acknowledge art theory (or the application of any kind of critical analysis to his work) continues to prevent most writers from attempting to do so. Should an artist's intention be allowed to constrain a more critical reading of their work?

I am not advocating completely abandoning the biographical narrative as a form of writing on art, as I concede that some knowledge of Curnoe's personal life may be helpful in understanding his art. But I believe that the overwhelming tendency of writers to focus on the connection between the two has

prevented a more critical, theoretical reading of his work.<sup>6</sup> The authors' decision to avoid a theoretical approach, while it may be wholly consistent with Curnoe's own beliefs, does not make for a critical art history.

What makes us so avidly consume the details of Curnoe's personal life, and what effect does this have? As David Bromwich points out, "we care about the lives of artists for any number of reasons, only some of them artistic."<sup>7</sup> Perhaps, on a basic level, biography satisfies our desire to know more about "celebrities", or perhaps we believe that by gaining access to the minutiae of Curnoe's everyday life we will become privy to the true meaning of his art. Because we understand biography as an instructive story, we inevitably connect it to "the stories we tell about texts."<sup>8</sup> It is important to remember that meaning is interactive – it is tempered by the social, historical, political and theoretical context of the viewer or reader, not inherent in the work or determined by the artist's biography. By rigidly adhering to biography to "explain" Curnoe's cultural production, scholars are limiting the potential meanings of his art. As Bromwich notes, "by construing an author's work as a transparent apology for his life ... our esteem for the work is diminished and our interest in the life sharpened."<sup>9</sup> We need to re-sharpen our interest in Curnoe's works, by mitigating the overpowering influence that his biography exerts.

While its dustjacket bills the work as a "book length study" of the artist, *Greg Curnoe: Life and Stuff* does not live up to its lofty claim. Yes, it is book length (although it includes 74 full pages of illustrations, and 35 pages with both text and illustrations), and yes, it is a study of his "life and stuff". Published in conjunction with the AGO's retrospective look at his career, the authors present Curnoe's life and art in an easily accessible, entertaining manner that is sure both to please a general audience unfamiliar with his work, and to reconfirm and reassure the opinions of those who knew him well. It would also undoubtedly have pleased the artist himself. It does not, however, forge any new ideas or analyses of his work. *Greg Curnoe: Life and Stuff* it is neither an exhibition catalogue (it does not

function as a guide to the exhibition) nor an academic work. While it presents many interesting details about Curnoe's life and work, by relying on his life story to explain his cultural production, it limits the possible interpretations of his work. Scholars need to be aware of how biography can contain and condition their research and analysis. By lessening the stranglehold that Curnoe's life story exerts on the understanding of his art, I believe that scholars may be able to separate the "life" from the "stuff", and Curnoe's art will finally get the critical attention it deserves.

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#### Notes

- 1 Dennis Reid and Matthew Teitelbaum, eds, *Greg Curnoe: Life and Stuff* (Toronto and Vancouver, 2001), dustjacket.
- 2 Greg Curnoe, *Some Lettered Works by Greg Curnoe 1961–1969*, exh. cat., London Art Gallery (London, 1975), 1.
- 3 Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz, *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist: A Historical Experiment* (New Haven, 1979), 11.
- 4 Natalie Zemon Davis, *Women on the Margins: Three Seventeenth-Century Lives* (Cambridge and London, 1995), 7.
- 5 Robert Murray and Ian and Ingrid Baxter (N.E. Thing Co.) were the other Canadian artists chosen for the São Paulo Bienale.
- 6 Some recent notable exceptions are: Katie Cholette, "Autobiographical Metaphors: The Interaction of Text and Image in the Works of Greg Curnoe," M.A. Thesis, Carleton University, 2001; Walter Klepac, *Reading: Public Signs, Private Acts*, exh. cat., Art Gallery of York University (Toronto, 1991); Diana Nemiroff, "This is Great Art Because it Wasn't Made by an American," *Vanguard*, 10, no. 8 (October 1981), 24–31; Barbara K. Stevenson, "The Political and Social Subject Matter in the Work of Joyce Wieland and Greg Curnoe," M.A. Thesis, Carleton University, 1987.
- 7 David Bromwich, "The Uses of Biography," *The Yale Review*, 73, no. 2 (January 1984), 175.
- 8 Bromwich, "The Uses of Biography," 162.
- 9 Bromwich, "The Uses of Biography," 162.

Martha Langford, *Suspended Conversations: The Afterlife of Memory in Photographic Albums*. Montreal and Kingston, London, Ithaca: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001, 256 pp., 80 black-and-white illus., \$49.95 Cdn.

While much has been written in Britain and the United States recently about the significance of the family photographic album, sadly up to now, little had been published in Canada.<sup>1</sup> Martha Langford's comprehensive study, *Suspended Conversations: The Afterlife of Memory in Photographic Albums* fills a gap in photographic history. Langford, an art historian and inde-

pendent curator, was the founding director of the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography. She has written widely on photography both nationally and internationally. Langford has painstakingly researched her subject and produced a book that is both a scholarly reference and well-crafted example of the reading or decoding of the narratives hidden in the family photo album. Her astute observations about the nature of photo albums reference a selection of key theorists and writers on photography including: Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag, Rosalind Krauss, Pierre Bourdieu, Marianne Hirsch, John Berger, Susan Stewart, Griselda Pollock and Halla Beloff. Particularly note-