



# Mr. Concept

BY SARAH SCOTT • PHOTO ROBERT NELSON



IAIN BAXTER& is rediscovered and rediscovered and...

Yann Toma is every bit a Paris intellectual. At 42, he has wild hair, a cravat over a green-and-white polka-dotted shirt, a professor's job at the Sorbonne, and a tendency to quote Baudelaire in everyday conversation. The son of two of the Opéra de Paris's great ballet stars, he has grown up with intellectuals and artists in a city that is renewing its relationship with contemporary art. He is an *artiste-chercheur*, but back in 1991 he surprised his friends when he occupied a defunct electricity company, Ouest Lumière, just outside of Paris. Declaring himself "president for life," Toma set about building a company with real stakeholders and a mission to create "artistic energy." It was an audacious move for Paris, where artists who make money and associate with men in suits are viewed with suspicion—even pity. Then Toma discovered that an artist collective in Canada had done the same thing, a generation earlier: N.E. Thing Co. Ltd., a Vancouver-based idea factory founded in 1966. Its founder and president, IAIN BAXTER& (né Iain Baxter), had slipped into artistic obscurity, but four decades ago he and the collective were more visible in the US than any other Canadian artists of the time.

Toma had found his intellectual godfather. He soon discovered other artist-run companies, or *entreprises critiques*. These artists are studying the corporation just as intently as previous generations studied the nude. They're looking at it from all angles. Some are posing as corporations, like Mercenary International Inc., which has received plenty of CVs from men who want to be real-life mercenaries. Others, like the late American artist Mark Lombardi, expose the connection between money and power. In London, Henrik Schrat installed a former investment banker in an art school, in a 2002 work aptly called *Manager in Residence*. The Parisian artists in this new wave call themselves Art&Flux, and when they get together at the Sorbonne to talk, they always leave one chair at the table empty. On that chair,

IAIN BAXTER& in front of his garage in Windsor, Ontario, December, 2011

they prop up a photograph. It is BAXTER&, looking like a modern-day Uncle Pennybags. There's a reason that BAXTER& occupies a privileged position at the table, Toma says: "He's very central for us."

**BAXTER& IS SAVOURING** this connection. After a generation out of the lime-light, he's back. A retrospective opened in Chicago in November 2011 and is currently on view at the Art Gallery of Ontario. In books and articles, he's being hailed as the first McLuhanesque artist in Canada; one scholar even featured a BAXTER& landscape on the cover of a volume on the Canadian media theorist. BAXTER& is collaborating with an e-librarian from York University to create a wild online *catalogue raisonné*: they say it is a 21st-century digital version of 18th-century catalogues of shells, which were as valuable then as contemporary art is now. Barbara Fischer, the director and chief curator of the University of Toronto's Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, gave N.E. Thing Co. a prominent place in "Traffic," a touring 2010 show on the history of conceptual art in Canada: "N.E. Thing Co. is really a major reference point because they started early," she says. "One could not write a history of conceptual art in Canada without including their work."

It's not surprising that each of these discoverers sees something different in BAXTER&'s work. He's an artistic nomad, a cultural explorer who skips from one idea to the next without settling on anything: one day he's making vacuum-formed landscapes and still lifes; the next he's grabbing the corporate structure as if it were a found object, like Marcel Duchamp's urinal. He then flips the switch and uses his camera to redefine what a photograph can be. David Silcox, the president of Sotheby's Canada and a long-time BAXTER& supporter, puts it this way: "He changes the definition of art nearly every time he does something."

BAXTER& lives with his wife in Windsor, Ontario, on the edge of Lake St. Clair. Across the lake he can see Grosse Pointe, Michigan, home of the rusting Detroit auto industry, but in the foreground, in a recently constructed pool, he can see the current objects of his fixation: ampersands floating on the surface of the water. BAXTER& has fallen for the ampersand. "It's always connecting things," he says. "It might be the DNA of language. If there are no ampersands, everything falls apart." He legally changed his name to IAIN BAXTER& in 2005 and had the ampersand tattooed on the backs of both his hands. He has obtained trademarks on some uses of the symbol, and wants to team up with a business partner to capitalize on ampersands, starting with T-shirts and caps. An ampersand is stitched onto a black baseball cap that BAXTER& routinely wears with his favourite T-shirt, which reads "Masturbating Life Makes Art™." BAXTER& doesn't stop. At 75, he has smooth skin, a strong gait and an earnest, inquiring, relentless mind that usually moves sideways. It's "a young mind," a friend reflects. "He'll try anything."

**FOUR DECADES** before BAXTER& changed his name, he was already enveloped in a corporate identity as part of N.E. Thing Co., launched in Vancouver in 1966. At the time, BAXTER& was teaching art to undergrads at Simon Fraser University. He tells me the story: as a child of a Calgary mechanical engineer, he read *Forbes*, along with art magazines. He liked to play with words, and after hearing about J. C. Penney, he started experimenting with his own name. "Iain" became "N.E." "I'm kind of about anything, so wouldn't it be really great to have something about anything?" *Forbes* gave him an idea:

**"I'M KIND OF ABOUT ANYTHING, SO WOULDN'T IT BE REALLY GREAT TO HAVE SOMETHING ABOUT ANYTHING?"**

"Why don't I have a company?" Andy Warhol had his factory, and Duchamp had co-launched the Société Anonyme Inc. to exhibit contemporary art. But why not go all the way, and create a real company, registered with the authorities, that would operate like a company? He thought about the artists he knew with leftist leanings: "It would blow their minds."

It certainly did. Here was an artist who had gone over to the dark side: the administrative world of the corporation, which seemed to be way outside the scope of art, as art was defined at the time. Carl Andre, the minimalist sculptor and poet who later ignited a famous controversy in Britain over his firebricks sculpture, offered his friend a dollar not to do it. But BAXTER& was to be a company man, a president, and he subsumed his name in N.E. Thing Co. His first wife, Ingrid (who was then called Elaine), was vice-president.

The new company, registered in British Columbia to "produce sensitivity information" and "provide consultation and evaluation services" gave BAXTER& a much bigger scope in which to play. He had acquired a taste for the absurd at 17, the summer before he was to go to the University of Idaho on a ski scholarship. He broke his neck in a car crash and, narrowly avoiding paralysis, spent the summer itching in a body cast, feeling like a mummy. He then went to college in a neck brace that made him feel like Herman Munster. "It gave me a knock on the head, a Zen knock," says BAXTER&. "You realize it can be over any minute, so you might as well have fun."

So he did, especially when it came to poking fun at the pomposity of the art world. N.E. Thing Co.'s best-known product was a running photographic commentary on the art world. ACTs, or "aesthetically claimed things," were pictures of fallen logs, steel pilings or other non-art objects that deserved artistic appreciation. ARTs ("aesthetically rejected things") included works by famous artists. The photos were embellished with *Good Housekeeping*-style seals—gold for ACTs and red for ARTs. The inspiration came from Duchamp, who famously scandalized the art world in 1917 by including a urinal in an art exhibition, thereby launching the idea of "ready-mades" as the stuff of contemporary art. N.E. Thing Co. underlined the point on its buttons, which proclaimed: "ART is all over." You could read this as a statement about where you should see art—or as a comment on painting and the tortured geniuses that produced the great abstract-expressionist works of the postwar period. Whatever: "I like ambiguity," BAXTER& says.

Enter Lucy R. Lippard: In the mid-1960s, she was the most influential critic writing about a generation of New York artists who were trying to figure out what to do and how to be after abstract expressionism had spent most of its force. Some of these artists had emerged from minimalism, and were thinking about how to play out the "less is more" axiom; others were exploring questions Duchamp had posed 50 years before: "What is a work of art?" "What is an artist?" Both streams were converging on a new idea: the thing didn't matter anymore—not nearly as much as the idea of the person who created it. This was to be called "conceptual" art, or, as Lippard and John Chandler memorably termed it, the "dematerialization of art." The studio, she said, had been transformed into a study. The art world was recognizing that a work could be a line in the desert, a hole in the wall, words on paper, silence. As the formidable art historian Benjamin H. D. Buchloh describes it in a 1990 essay in *October*, the premise was to replace the object of spatial and perceptual experience with a linguistic definition alone. Conceptual art "thus constituted the most consequential assault



on the status of that object: its visuality, its commodity status, and its form of distribution." This sort of art also questioned the roles of the author and the spectator. It was, Buchloh writes, "the postwar period's most rigorous investigation of the conventions of pictorial and sculptural representation and a critique of the traditional paradigms of visuality."

In this introspective period, Lippard set out to organize a show in Seattle called "557,087," and a companion in Vancouver, "955,000" (the numbers reflected the cities' populations). The catalogue for the shows, which included the biggest names in minimal and conceptual art, was a bunch of index cards that could be read in any order; a number of the pieces took place outside the gallery. N.E. Thing Co. and other Canadian artists were invited to contribute to the Seattle show.

Lippard met N.E. Thing Co. in late 1967. She was impressed: BAXTER& was an artist out in Vancouver—far from the scene in New York—who had somehow tuned into the same wavelength as her friends in Manhattan. Yet, unlike most of the artists she knew, BAXTER& did not have deep artistic training; he studied forestry and zoology at the University of Idaho and learned about art history by helping professors with their slides while doing his MFA at Washington State University. He was an outsider, in every way. BAXTER& was happy he'd had a life outside of art school; it gave him the freedom to make the mental flips that open doors to new ways of seeing. "Baxter has independently had a lot of the same ideas as New York artists, at the same time, without knowing theirs; the reverse is also true," Lippard

wrote in *artscanada* in 1969. "Such ideas are in the air as the result of general conditions of prevailing style and thought pattern."

What made BAXTER& stand out, Lippard noted, was his "unique" approach to photography. For the conceptualist who was trying to make the object disappear—or at least to make it the servant of the artist's idea—photography posed a problem. A photo is, by its very nature, pictorial. How, then, do you "dematerialize" it? As Jeff Wall would later point out in an essay in *Reconsidering the Object of Art 1965–1975*, one way was to play the amateur, as Ed Ruscha did in his 1963 book *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*. Although Wall didn't mention it, this non-art approach to photography was signature N.E. Thing Co. BAXTER& "was one of the first people to pick up on the use of photography from a conceptual point of view," says the artist Ian Wallace, who studied under BAXTER&, in a phone conversation. Take the seminal 1968 project *Portfolio of Piles*, a series of pictures of piles in industrial Vancouver. Viewers could look at them in any order, and find them outdoors with the help of addresses and a map supplied by the artists. BAXTER& showed little interest in the formal conventions of art photography. He engaged the great Vancouver photographer Fred Herzog to record some of the piles, but when Herzog was taking his time on the set-up, BAXTER& got impatient. "Just take the picture!" he told Herzog. The point, according to Wallace, was to make you focus on the new landscape. BAXTER&'s photographs made you "look at a modern city in a new way."

N.E. Thing Co. blasted into the cortex of the New York conceptual-art

N.E. THING CO. *Start Viewing*,  
Deep Cove, BC 1968/2002  
C-print 76.2 cm x 1.14 m

COLLECTION AGNES ETHERINGTON  
ART CENTRE, QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY  
PHOTO BERNARD CLARK

movement at the very moment when artists didn't have to be great painters with deep understandings of art history in order to be stars. Rather than working with paintbrushes, the collective used the tools of the information world, especially the telephone, the telecopier and the new-fangled telex (a precursor of the Internet), to communicate directly with some of the most important people in art. They corresponded with Ruscha. They befriended the earth artist Robert Smithson. They travelled to the Arctic with Lippard and Lawrence Weiner. N.E. Thing Co.'s greatest PR coup was landing the May–June 1969 cover of *Art in America*: a series of slides of ACTs stamped with the N.E. Thing Co. gold seal. "Anything's a masterpiece," BAXTER& explains.

N.E. Thing Co.'s frontal assault on the heroic idea of the artist took centre stage in Canada a month later, when they set up shop at the National Gallery in Ottawa. Calling themselves visual informers, N.E. Thing Co. created a "visual sensitivity information centre" at the gallery to show people how a working structure functions: a bland row of desks for secretaries, with phones and telexes—all the better to infiltrate the global corporate network. The administrative aesthetic looked so real that some people walked out, thinking they had come to the wrong place.

Gentle satire? Irony? Maybe. Yet N.E. Thing Co. developed serious business aspirations. It was time, they wrote, to create a financial base that would liberate artists from the "charity of those who for whatever psychological, sociological or other reasons, wish to support the arts." They finally stepped into the hard world of business in 1977, when they launched EYE SCREAM, a restaurant that served up cubist shrimp and hamburgers on pedestals to artists who would become international art celebrities. This was no longer a concept; EYE SCREAM had real investors. It paid for things in real money and employed real people, such as the artist Roy Arden. Within two years, it went bust. To deal with the considerable financial losses, N.E. Thing Co. had to pay their lawyer with a pair of plastic vacuum-formed landscapes. BAXTER& and Ingrid's marriage ended. They dissolved the company and sold their house. In 1979, BAXTER& left town for Europe.

Returning to Canada in 1981, he bounced around, from a job teaching art in Alberta to a brief stint as a "creative consultant" at Labatt and finally to Windsor, where he settled down as an art professor. By then, he had married again, to Louise Chance, a nurse. He'd met her through the personals. He was looking for a "very well est./beautiful/buxom/slim creative lady...for rewarding life/love time." But as far as the art world was concerned, BAXTER& had slipped out of sight. When Buchloh wrote his influential assessment of conceptual art in 1990, two decades after its "temporary disappearance," he didn't mention N.E. Thing Co. or BAXTER&.

"It was sad," says Wallace, who established an international career while BAXTER& was teaching in Windsor. "I don't think IAIN fully understood the relevance of his ideas." BAXTER& could make an austere conceptual idea fun and accessible: "He was the link between conceptual and pop art," Wallace says. But after BAXTER& left Vancouver, "he just lost his momentum and let his work go. He ceased to be able to take his innovations and develop them in a coherent way, and make them last. He became a little isolated." Unlike many conceptual artists, BAXTER& isn't a writer, and he didn't publish articles peppered with references to semiotics and poststructuralism to justify his position to the art world. And so it was that the great PR man slipped out of sight.

**IT TOOK OTHER** intellectuals to bring BAXTER& back to life. In 2002, Richard Cavell, an English professor at the University of British Columbia (UBC), published *McLuhan in Space*. After a couple of decades in the intellectual hinterland, Marshall McLuhan was hot again; with the arrival of the Internet, his theories finally made sense. For the cover, Cavell said, the choice was obvious: it could only be IAIN BAXTER&, because his art expresses some of the profound thoughts of one of the greatest intellectuals of our time.

McLuhan published *Understanding Media* in 1964. It contained many dazzling insights, but the basic premise was this: the invention of the printed word in the 15th century changed the way we think and behave. It made us more visual, more likely to read alone and less likely to absorb information in a group, around a fire, as people did in preliterate societies. The new medium of print encouraged us to think in a linear way: to think that one thing leads to another or causes another. But the new electronic age—which, for McLuhan, was TV, telephones, telexes and satellites—will change us, just as print changed us. We will use more of our senses to absorb information. We will absorb information from all over, all at once, instead of assimilating one thing at a time. When you consider its impact on us, the medium—the electronic medium—is actually more important than the message it contains. It's a little like the car: it doesn't really matter whether a car is a Ferrari or a Buick. Either way, it changes the landscape, the air, the economy and the way most of us live every single day.

Only a few months after *Understanding Media* came out, Abraham Rogatnik, an architecture professor, organized a McLuhanesque festival at UBC. It was, as Tom Wolfe later described it in his essay "What If He's Right?," an "undulating" sensorium that included light projections on sheets of plastic. BAXTER& coordinated the visual-art program for the event.

"When I ran into McLuhan, I felt like I had come home," BAXTER& tells me. "He was talking about a global electronic network around the world. It's like our nervous system." Seeing the world in systems made sense to BAXTER&; having studied zoology and ecology, he was used to thinking about how species move and migrate. Up until then, BAXTER& had been working with plastic—it was taking over the grocery-store check-out counter at the time, and he used plastic to make still lifes and landscapes, either vacuum-formed or bagged. But through McLuhan he discovered a new landscape—an information landscape. "I see information just everywhere. It's the main ingredient of our lives, and a national resource for our country," he says. That includes art. "I'm one of the few artists who thinks of art as information."

BAXTER& met McLuhan only once, at a lunch in Vancouver organized by Silcox, then the senior arts officer for the Canada Council. BAXTER& was eager to meet McLuhan. He once sent the thinker a telex: "Sit down and with a pair of scissors cut 4 inches off your tie and please mail it immediately to Iain Baxter." According to Silcox, the lunch in Vancouver was a dud, and BAXTER& later sent McLuhan a button inscribed with "VIP"—"Visually Illiterate Person."

The artist and the intellectual, however, were on the same wavelength, says Cavell. You can see it in N.E. Thing Co.'s photography, in pictures such as *Sign, Highway 17, near Sudbury, Ontario*. The 1969 picture, shot through the windshield on a highway, shows an empty sign on a bleak



landscape. "It's framing nature," Cavell points out, suggesting that the photograph is trying to remind us "we live not in a natural world but in an information world." The picture on the cover of his *McLuhan in Space* makes the same point. *Urban Landscape* (1980) features a landscape in which a huge blue sky is strewn with puffy clouds. "He's trying to remind us we're looking at a picture (and not nature itself); we're viewing the world through this medium," says Cavell.

BAXTER& has even been credited with creating the first public celebration of McLuhanism: *Bagged Place* (1966), which may very well have been the first art installation in Canada. He created a four-room apartment in which everything—even a child's poop in the toilet—was bagged. Cavell says that the bags illustrate several McLuhanesque themes, such as the "mediated environment" and the interweaving of culture and business. But BAXTER&'s former wife, Ingrid, is sceptical: "This Marshall McLuhan bit is much overrated," she says over the phone. "I skimmed his book, but I don't think IAIN read, from cover to cover, any of McLuhan's philosophy. It's much exaggerated." She and BAXTER& were far more influenced by Vancouver artists and by Duchamp, she says.

Silcox, who studied under McLuhan, thinks the artist and the intellectual "were running parallel" in a lot of ways. "I never thought of IAIN as a big reader," Silcox reflects. Yet BAXTER& did inhale the intellectual currents of his time. "He grabs what he needs and makes it his own," says Silcox.



TOP: IAIN BAXTER& *Television Works* (detail) 1999–2006 Acrylic paint on reclaimed televisions, reclaimed pedestals and reclaimed

metal wall brackets Dimensions variable PHOTO ART GALLERY OF ONTARIO © 2012 IAIN BAXTER&

BOTTOM: IAIN BAXTER& in *Bagged Place* at the University of British Columbia's Fine Arts Gallery, February, 1966 COURTESY THE ARTIST

So, just as the Internet was being developed in California, N.E. Thing Co. grabbed the telex—the business world’s prototype of the Internet—and started experimenting. Among other things, they came up with an early version of social networking, nearly four decades before the phrase entered our vocabulary. “IAIN is very well-travelled, although he does his best to hide it,” says Cavell. “He’d never admit it, but he’s a very sophisticated person.”

**IN THE SPRING** of 2005, David Moos, then the curator of contemporary art at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO), drove down Highway 401 to meet BAXTER& in Windsor. Moos had bumped into the artist at a dinner party in Toronto, and he had a hunch that it was time for another look. He knew that the AGO had covered the highlights of N.E. Thing Co. in 1982, and that a UBC show in 1993 had tried to restore BAXTER&’s position in conceptual art. But these were Canadian shows for Canadians. Moos wanted to take a Canadian artist outside the country, and BAXTER& might be just the right artist for the job. Moos met him in a classroom at the University of Windsor, where the artist put on a five-hour slide show. “It was haphazard, anecdotal, non-hierarchical,” Moos says. He was sold. Now he needed an American partner, and he knew just whom to call.

The first time that Michael Darling, now the chief curator at Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, saw BAXTER&’s work was in 2002, when he visited the dealer Catriona Jeffries in Vancouver. Some years before, Jeffries had visited Windsor, where she had burrowed through piles of N.E. Thing Co. pictures and memorabilia—what BAXTER& likes to call his “intellectual compost”—at BAXTER&’s home and on campus at the University of Windsor. Darling, then the assistant curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, was intrigued. “IAIN was far ahead of the curve. I was surprised I didn’t know him.” Incorporating N.E. Thing Co. was “a crazy innovation that no one else was doing,” he notes. Yet BAXTER&’s career stalled because he was “peripatetic as an artist, discontinuous, scattershot. I even heard one person call him a dilettante. But he’s fascinating because of the twists and turns. It shows an active mind, whether it is financially advantageous or not.”

When Darling was appointed curator of modern and contemporary art at the Seattle Art Museum in 2006, he found a stop sign that read “GO,” a relic from N.E. Thing Co.’s subversive trip to a Seattle trade show. Then Darling learned that BAXTER& was influenced by two mystical kings of the Seattle art scene: Morris Graves and Mark Tobey. That did it. “He was the missing link for me between Seattle and Jeff Wall and Vancouver,” says Darling. When Moos called, Darling bought in, and the two curators set out to bring BAXTER&’s work back to life.

BAXTER&’s story, Moos suggests, is “a chronology of innovation.” Among other things, he is “the seminal pioneer of the light box.” BAXTER& got the idea from a dentist’s office, and in 1968 used it to illuminate *Nude* (1968), an N.E. Thing Co. work that ended up in a show at the National Gallery. To appreciate just how innovative this was, Moos says, consider this: colour photography was not sanctioned by a museum until 1976. BAXTER& can be very hard to track, Moos notes, “but you’ve got to understand him as a pollinator. He’s trying things out.” He opened a lot of avenues for other artists in Vancouver, Moos says. “He’s one of the key people who opened up art’s possibilities. *Bagged Place* is not a landscape painting.”

**EARLY NOVEMBER** in Chicago: The weather outside is glorious, and Darling, Moos, Jeffries and BAXTER&’s current dealer, Jane Corkin, have assembled with a handful of collectors at the Museum of Contemporary Art. Up on the second floor, BAXTER& is in his uniform—a black cap stitched with a white ampersand on the front and his “Masturbating Life Makes Art™” slogan on the back, a camera around his neck. He looks eager, and very pleased. “I like to think of myself as a visual explorer,” he tells the crowd as we pass from a room full of the vacuum-formed still lifes and landscapes that he made early in his career. We move on to the ACTs and ARTs, and BAXTER& pauses in front of a photo of the Duchamp oeuvre, which received both an ACT seal of approval and an ART rejection: “Duchamp never wanted his ready-mades to be accepted, so I rejected them for him.” Everyone laughs. “I like to have fun with the whole art world,” he says. The show suggests there is another consistent line through the photos, the light boxes, the vacuum-formed landscapes and the *Zero Emissions* (2008) installation, with its stuffed animals sitting atop a group of mufflers: it is BAXTER&’s concern for the environment. “This is a topic you rarely find in contemporary-art dialogue,” says Darling.

One key person is missing: Ingrid, the vice-president of N.E. Thing Co. After divorcing BAXTER&, she finished her master’s degree and bought a boat-rental company in Deep Cove, British Columbia. She and BAXTER& share the proceeds from all N.E. Thing Co. works sold, but the real issue is this: who was the creator? BAXTER&: “I bounced ideas off of her. Now it’s coming back to bite me.” Ingrid: “Our collaboration was so strong, there was no separation. I can clearly see my influence...in the structure of things, verbal and visual.” BAXTER&, she concedes, did most of the physical work to create the art, but she was totally involved in creating the ideas. “Sometimes I laugh a little: who is the true conceptual artist?”

Art is all over: even as BAXTER& is enjoying a revival inside the walls of a museum, he’s spreading out into the digital world. It started when someone else discovered him. Adam Lauder, an e-librarian at York University, met BAXTER& in the slide room at the University of Windsor. It was technically Lauder’s office, but BAXTER& had taken over the computer. After a few months together, BAXTER& exclaimed, “Hey, you should be the expert on me!” Soon after, Lauder found a way to answer. He was intrigued by the *catalogue raisonné*, which is traditionally a comprehensive catalogue of an artist’s work. Library scientists order information by categorizing it and by creating hierarchies, but Lauder knew this would never do for BAXTER&; he defies categorization. So why not invent a new form of *raisonné* that would present information in a way that allows the viewer to decide what’s important, and how to order it? Outsiders could even register themselves as researchers and contribute. Lauder pitched the idea to York University, and started work on BAXTER&’s online *raisonné*. (Full disclosure: Lauder’s job is funded by a foundation set up by my grandfather.)

Lauder’s first job was to start scanning. When he first examined the piles on the second floor of BAXTER&’s house, “it was like going into a cave.” The studio area wasn’t heated in winter: it was dark and cold, “disorganized, to say the least.” BAXTER& “has a total output of 20,000 to 50,000 items,” says Lauder. “It’s possible he’s the most prolific Canadian artist of all time.” Lauder has been scanning ever since. The online *raisonné* looks nothing like a sober, scholarly archive. It’s a messy collage of goofy snapshots and



intellectual essays, by Lauder and others. Underneath the screaming green homepage is a serious thinker, Lauder says: “I never lose sight of the fact that BAXTER& is one of the earliest thinkers to recognize the full implications of information and information technology for art and society.”

**THE STORY OF HOW** BAXTER&’s picture ended up on an empty chair at the Sorbonne begins—and ends—with a Parisian art writer and professor, Christophe Domino. We settle down to a drink at the Café Beaubourg, facing the Centre Pompidou, on a warm November evening. Back in the mid-1990s, Domino was working at the Pompidou, combing the files on contemporary American art as research for a French art dictionary. When he came across BAXTER&, he loved the absurdity and the serious play of the work, but was surprised that the files said so little about the artist. Intrigued, Domino called BAXTER& for a contribution to an exhibition he was organizing in Corsica. BAXTER& replied with a picture, *You Are Now in the Middle of a N.E. Thing Co. Landscape* (1968). Domino later flew to Canada to see BAXTER&’s work. “People asked why a French critic would care,” he says. But Domino insisted that BAXTER& was every bit as radical

as the more famous New York artists, and he was instrumental in the Frac Bretagne’s acquisition of several of the artist’s works. Then he introduced BAXTER& to his artist friends at the Sorbonne, including Yann Toma.

“IAIN is like Voltaire’s Candide. He is a philosophical naïf,” says Domino. “He lives in the present. He has a perfect intuition of the history of art, but it’s not the history of art that interests or nourishes him. It’s really the present.” In fact, according to Domino, BAXTER& doesn’t see much difference between the past and the present, even when it comes to selling his own work. He’ll whip up a new version of one of his works from the late 1960s and think it’s better, even though it has no historical value. It might make sense to a conceptual artist who values the idea more than the thing, but “it’s an *incohérence* from the market’s and the museums’ points of view,” Domino says. BAXTER& now wants to rebrand his early work under his new name. “Impossible,” says Domino. BAXTER& doesn’t see the problem. It’s frustrating, even for friends like Domino, but it’s part of his charm. “He doesn’t hide anything,” says Domino. “Everything is visible, even the contradictions.” ■

Discover more of IAIN BAXTER&’s work at [canadianart.ca/baxter&](http://canadianart.ca/baxter&)

IAIN BAXTER& *Zero Emissions* 2008  
Taxidermied animals, car exhaust pipes and painted metal C-clamps  
Dimensions variable  
COLLECTION  
THE ARTIST PHOTO ART GALLERY  
OF ONTARIO © 2012 IAIN BAXTER&

**“IT’S POSSIBLE HE’S THE MOST PROLIFIC CANADIAN ARTIST OF ALL TIME.”**