

INGRID BAXTER / In the Wilds of the Art World: Riverside Drive

“What was art in the sixties as it relates to the North Shore?” You are asking me a very interesting question taking me back over forty years! Closer to fifty years if you go from 2009 to 1964! Your story of a visiting Zen Master and meditation on Riverside Drive, as Scott Watson remembers, interests me. Maybe the myths are more interesting than the facts!

I feel that I should give a brief background as to our family’s arrival at Riverside Drive along the Seymour River in about the fall of 1966. Our son, Tor, was born in 1961 in Japan where we studied art in Japan and absorbed some Zen Buddhism by osmosis which I now understand is one of the better ways to enlightenment. Our daughter, Erian, came into the world in Spokane, Washington in 1963 when we were both working on Masters degrees at Washington State University. Iain finished his MFA and I finished my M.Ed twenty years later after Iain and the kids were gone. Iain sent out over 200 application letters for teaching jobs and was subsequently hired to teach in UBC’s Fine Arts Department. So . . . we moved into faculty housing on Presidents’ Row. We met many people who all had some effect on the development of the N.E.Thing Co. Some of these people included Joanne and David Suzuki, Henry and Vi Elder, Abe Rogatnik and Alvin Balkind, Toni and Gloria Onley, Roy and Monika Kiyooka, Arthur Erickson, and many others. In Iain’s art classes there were several interesting students—Ian Wallace, Jeff Wall, Dennis Wheeler, Karen Rowden, Duane Lunden, and more. The New Design Gallery and the UBC Fine Arts Gallery were centres of interesting art activity and, of course, the Vancouver Art Gallery. All of this support was very important in the development of Vancouver art in the sixties. Not much about the North Shore so far, eh? It was real estate that got us to North Vancouver.

Iain and I bought a house in the 4000 block on 14th for \$14,000 and sold it six months later for \$16,500. Then we bought a house in the 4500 block on West 1st for \$19,000. Iain left teaching at UBC for the new, up-and-coming Simon Fraser University’s Centre for Communications and the Arts. I was also teaching but in the Physical Education Department where in 1967 we held one of the first—and probably only—“Aquatic Water Happenings” to celebrate the

Centennial of the Province, or was it for Canada's Centennial? The event was held in the Simon Fraser Swimming Pool. It ended with a parade in the water carrying sparklers that were passed up into the audience who were invited to join the swimmers while a band played for a dance in the water! The audience had been forewarned to come in bathing suits. I can remember Judith Copithorne coming over to me and saying, "Ingrid, I'm scared of water but this is really fun!" Amazing what art can do! I can remember Brian Fisher with a fishing line from the 3-Meter diving platform, Carole Itter, Moira French acting like a French maid, Glenn Lewis, Michael Morris and Brydon Smith, whose job was to drop fireworks into a bucket, were all there. Michael was delighted when we had a repeat performance at the Holiday Inn in downtown Vancouver.

Back to real estate. Because Iain and I both had to drive 45 minutes each way from the 4500 block of West 1st to teach at SFU we decided to move. We heard from Henry Elder that Riverside Drive along the Seymour River was an interesting area and we bought a one-bedroom cottage there for \$17,000 and added on with materials from Jack's Used Building Materials in Burnaby. It became our home and the headquarters of N.E. Thing Company until we split up in the late seventies.

In racking my brain and reflecting on your question, "Art in the sixties on the North Shore" . . . the North Shore part starts here, on Riverside Drive.

Iain and I had a great amount of fun in our collaborationistic synergistics (maybe my word-creativity showing here). We had heaps of creative joy in the many art concepts and resulting art products that we came up with. We were always challenging the systems of the art and business worlds. The ACTs and ARTs and ANTs (aesthetically claimed thing, aesthetically rejected thing, and aesthetically neutral thing) was the same process as the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval and gave us the same power to declare things as ACTs, ARTs, or ANTs. Many of our projects were open-ended and could be created into a lifetime of activity. It was fun, fun, fun! I think that this joy remains and is resonating with generations now. All that we did though, was not worth a hoot if we didn't have an audience.

Many people in the art world at large—from San Francisco, Los Angeles, New York and Europe—came to visit Vancouver and to see us in North Vancouver. It was the result of people like Alvin Balkind, Doris and Jack Shadbolt, heads of galleries and schools who invited artists and art critics to come to Vancouver,



N.E. Thing Co., Act #48 Dave Buck Ford's
Flourescent Pink Canopy Structure Over Cars and
Trucks, Marine Drive, Near 1st Narrows Bridge,
North Vancouver, B.C., 1968, 33 x 49.5 cm, BG1390

N.E. Thing Co., Act #30 Cement Transitional Wall Along
Entire Park & Tilford Co. Main Street, North Vancouver,
B.C., 1968, 33 x 49.5 cm, BG1392

who in turn invited us as Co-Presidents of N.E. Thing Co. to have shows. When we travelled, we met other people and, of course, invited them to come and visit us on the North Shore. Most of the “big city people” really enjoyed the rural environment of Riverside Drive, Mount Seymour, Grouse Mountain, and all.

Lucy Lippard and her partner Seth Siegelaub visited Vancouver a few times. I can remember one time when at a party at our house, Bob Smithson who was in the area to cover an island with glass, Bob and Lucy Lippard were going at it in typical New York style of conversation and George Sawchuk, our Riverside Drive dear artist neighbour, said “Boy, if that is what New York is like, I am never going there!” George developed into quite an interesting artist and now lives near Fanny Bay on Vancouver Island. His “Art Garden” of wood sculptures is included on many bus tours. Lucy at one time quoted Iain as saying that “A word is worth 1/1000th a picture.” Both Iain and I remember that it was my idea and that I should have been given credit but that’s how it went in a male-dominated culture of that time. It wasn’t often that we could remember who thought of what. I hope that women now get the credit that is due to them.

A journalist came from New York to photograph the *Extended Noland* and write about the N.E. Thing Co. for an issue of *Time* magazine. When he arrived at our house the temperature was way below freezing and had been for some time, the toilet was frozen solid, and the only water we had was from a continual running faucet outside. We had a blanket over the door to the new part of the house that we were building so that the part we were living in was kept warm. He probably had quite the stories to tell his mates when he got back to New York after that assignment!

There were various art “big guys” who came from the East to visit us and other Vancouver artists: David Silcox of the Canada Council, Pierre Theberge and Brydon Smith of the National Gallery. Judy Chicago and her partner from LA came. Judy was into coloured smokes and water dyes at that time. I can remember her turning the Seymour River into very interesting red flows as her expression of art at that time. Later, we had a great Thanksgiving dinner with them in LA. These are just a few of the many that came to the North Shore. We wondered where was the centre of the arts (other than us). Paris had been, then it was New York, then LA (when *Artforum* magazine was published there), and then back to New York, or maybe it was in the middle of the Atlantic because of the European conceptual artists. Does it matter?



One person who was active on the North Shore was Ken James, the Principal of the Maplewood Elementary School when Tor and Erian went there in the sixties. He knew of our various activities and became inspired to start the “Artists4Kids Trust Fund.” Glenn and Colleen Toppings lived in the little white house up Indian Arm above the big White House. Iain and I spent our first New Year’s party there where we stayed overnight . . . what fun!

Tom and Eda Burrows and the mudflats . . . they were the couple that we probably socialized with the most. Eda was a great spirit! I was happy when she split off into her clowning career. They had a great outhouse over the creek. When you would sit down you could see, feel, and hear the creek running below you. It was very conducive to producing results. Here’s another good story. I came to visit Eda one day and she was cooking a great big salmon. Knowing that salmon was expensive and that their cash flow was not great I asked her where did she get it. She said, “Oh, Tom just kicked it out of the creek.” Couldn’t be allowed either of those events these days.

I love your penchant to romanticize our time there in the sixties with questions about “wilderness living.” In reality, it was a small garage with a porch and one bedroom and kitchen to which we added a large living room, a couple of loft bedrooms and our office/workshop for N.E. Thing Co. The usual young people-struggles with the advantage that I could put aside my career for the time being and be an at-home Mom and collaborate with Iain to create the things we did. Good times!! We didn’t have much contact with North Shore culture—we were too busy. If I look back on those times, heaps of ideas and works were accomplished in the mid- to late-sixties.

You asked about the sculpture in Blueridge. We claimed it as an ACT. I believe that Dirk Oostindie, head of the District of North Vancouver Parks Department had it built to add colour to the area in a small park in Blueridge. Dirk did a lot of artistic things for the District. And the mirror reflection pieces . . . We did those in several places including the Seymour River. I was fascinated by the fact that when you position an object such as a mirror to reflect something visual, in its placement you also subtract something visual at the same time. Is this reflective writing doing the same? I wonder if these verbal reflections are much different from visual reflections. Nevertheless, I hope they give a sense of our life in the wilds of the art world and the wilds of North Vancouver.





A. KIPLING 1963