



# Tom Dean: GOOD-BYE

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Curated by Leila Timmins + Yan Wu

Tom Dean, *GOOD-BYE*, blue and gold sequins on canvas, 1970. Photograph of work hanging from Dean's studio on Saint Laurent Boulevard, Montreal by Gabor Szilasi.

## **3625 Saint-Laurent, A Primary Source: Tom Dean's 1970s Montréal, Revisited**

by Yan Wu

In 1970, Tom Dean hung a large piece of raw canvas outside the window of his studio at 3625 Blvd. St-Laurent in Montréal, precisely covering the width of the portion of the building corresponding to this address. Measuring twenty-three feet by six feet, the canvas bore gigantic lettering fashioned from glittering blue and gold sequins, spelling “GOOD-BYE.” Suspended in the air, this shimmering declaration was both direct and enigmatic—an ambiguous farewell, a gesture of departure, or perhaps an invitation to the future, a course in reverse. It marked the threshold of a lifelong practice—one that would unfold from that moment forward, not simply in the making of what is meant to be art, but in the act of being an artist.

In the years that followed, until he left Montréal for Toronto in 1976, 3625 Blvd. St-Laurent became more than a studio or living space. In an era before cellular phones and the internet—a reality that grows increasingly foreign for younger generations—it was an address that not only housed Dean’s artistic production but facilitated social relationships and organizing efforts. It acted as a postal hub for open calls to collaborate, a mailing point for family letters and correspondence related to publishing endeavours, a node in a national and international artist network, a set of coordinates anchoring his spatial experiments and urban interventions, and an environment for embodied experience and heightened consciousness. This was not just where Dean lived, but where his practice was put into contact with the city’s art community and an expanding cultural milieu—one that extended beyond Montréal, shaping and being shaped by artistic movements across Canada and internationally.

This moment, this place, acts as a conceptual and physical anchor for Dean’s work during this period—one that resonates throughout our exploration of this chapter of history. In turn, the address becomes a primary source, not only a fixed location but a point of entry into a reconstructed narrative that moves across time and space, tracing the myriad roles Dean inhabited at the time: artist, critic, journalist, editor, publisher, entrepreneur, son, student, and thinker. Through this framework, the address functions as both an archive and a structuring device, shaping how his work is understood in retrospect. In doing so,

this essay mirrors its own subject: sources are not merely referenced but are repurposed, and meaning is continually reassembled.

### “A Competitive Business”

In a 1971 interview for *artscanada*, reflecting on his piece, *GOOD-BYE*, Tom Dean stated:

What I would like to do and maybe what I will do, whether this is an art project or not, would be to start a competitive business, some sort of industry perhaps. Do it as well and as right as I could.<sup>1</sup>

Whether driven by necessity, ambition, or curiosity, entrepreneurship emerged as a persistent thread in Dean’s life—one he envisioned as free from the alienation of labour and the tedium of administration. His early years in Montréal were marked by pursuits that predated his entry into the contemporary art scene but hinted at a sensibility that would shape his artistic approach.

Before dropping out of his studies in physics and mathematics at Carleton University in Ottawa, Dean had been on a path to becoming a scientist, with plans to eventually work for the National Research Council (NRC). For the business plan he referred to in his 1971 interview, he envisioned opening an Information Access Centre, housed in a building resembling the NRC, where all data would be freely accessible to the public. However, his pursuit of science was interrupted when he became involved with Sock ‘n’ Buskin, a university theatre group led by John Palmer that experimented with the theatre of the absurd. There, Dean primarily worked on the technical side, handling set and sound production—although at times, the line blurred, particularly when he had to step onstage in costume to manage the live set alongside the acting crew.

After saving money from a summer spent surveying in the Northwest Territories, he moved to Montréal in 1967 at the age of twenty—or, in his own words, ran away from home without his parents’ permission. He arrived in a city that was in the midst of a profound transformation—its skyline reshaped by rapid urban expansion, its cultural sector energized by new state support for the arts, its education

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<sup>1</sup> Beverly Carter, “Conversations with Four Montreal Artists,” *artscanada* 28, no. 1 (February-March 1971): 18.

system breaking from religious control, and its political landscape shifting toward a modern, nationalist identity. Imbued with the aura of Expo 67 and a utopian optimism for the future, Montréal stood at the crossroads of reinvention and possibility.

At the same time, his generation—the post-war baby boomers—was coming of age, fueling an unprecedented youth culture. To be young at that moment was to be at the centre of the universe; for a fleeting few years, the world was opened wide before them, filled with the promise and urgency of youth-driven countercultural movements, political activism, and technological innovations.

Shortly after his arrival and before becoming involved in the local art scene, Dean embarked on his first venture in the city by opening a café with folk singer John Foley. Located at 3625 rue Aylmer and inspired by a coffeehouse in Greenwich Village—where Dean had recently seen a performance of *Marat/Sade* with John Palmer, while accompanying Palmer and his group on a production tour from Toronto to Calgary to Yale—the Yellow Door Coffeehouse emerged as an initiative of the Student Christian Movement at McGill University and became a gathering spot for music and poetry. Event posters from the time list notable performers from Montréal’s late-1960s music scene, including Tex König, Penny Lang, Nancy White, and draft dodger Jesse Winchester, as well as Margaret Atwood, who was still primarily known as a poet.

This was not Dean’s first business venture. In 1964, at the age of seventeen, operating from a home address on another Aylmer Avenue, in Ottawa, he was the president of National Scientific Service, a mail-order business specializing in “Formulas, Plans, and Trade Secrets.” In a neatly typed catalogue, accompanied by a matching envelope with a professionally printed letterhead, Dean’s business offered 423 different “formulas” at \$1 each, ranging from facial cream to suede cleaner, dog deterrents, and auto polish, with all sales conducted through the postal system. He recalled that this was a common business model at the time, catering to the era’s burgeoning DIY culture and often advertised in magazines such as *Popular Mechanics*, but the business never took off. Similarly, the Yellow Door Coffeehouse was never lucrative. Dean and Foley eventually sold it in 1968 to the person who had been making sandwiches there, merely breaking even on their initial investment.

From the late 1960s through the 1970s, artists increasingly appropriated corporate structures as artistic strategies—what Lucy Lippard termed the years of dematerialization and Benjamin Buchloh later categorized as an “aesthetics of administration,” a distinctive

occupation of conceptual art. Unlike Dean's sincere belief in his business ventures, this "business as art" approach deliberately blurred the boundaries between bureaucratic systems, commercial aesthetics, and conceptual art. A key example is N.E. Thing Co., founded by Iain and Ingrid Baxter in 1966 in Vancouver, which functioned as both an artistic collective and aesthetic corporation, engaging in data collection, urban documentation, and corporate-style classifications of everyday life. The documents generated through this seemingly functional yet absurd business were then circulated as works of art in museums and galleries.

At age seventeen or twenty, it is unlikely that Dean was consciously performing institutional critique or conceptual dematerialization. Looking back, however, and reevaluating his words in light of the artist he later became—for example, during his *artscanada* interview, conducted in a period parallel to N.E. Thing Co.'s conceptual practice—he seemed to genuinely believe in creating a real business and in being an entrepreneur, in much the same way as Marcel Duchamp sincerely believed his *Rotoreliefs* could succeed as a commercially viable product. Duchamp introduced the *Rotoreliefs*—a series of double-sided, spinning optical discs—in 1935 at the Concours Lépine, a French amateur inventors' fair. Designed to create visual illusions when spun on a turntable at specific speeds, these discs were intended as a playful fusion of art and optical science. Despite producing five hundred sets, financially backed by his friend and patron Henri-Pierre Roché, Duchamp's venture was commercially unsuccessful, as the fair's audience was more interested in practical inventions; his booth was wedged between a garbage-compressing machine on one side and an instant vegetable chopper on the other. "Error, one hundred per cent. At least, that's clear," Duchamp remarked to Roché after selling only two sets to friends and a single disc to a stranger over three days of promotion.<sup>2</sup> Yet, error and offense are precisely the qualities Tom Dean sought in art, not as missteps but as inherent forces of resistance, dismantling established conventions and asserting the artist's autonomy; perhaps this was more a form of entrepreneurialism than conceptualism, one might say.

### Meaning is Superficial

After folding the coffeehouse business, Tom Dean took a job working in the mines in Sudbury. During a brutal winter underground, he turned to

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<sup>2</sup> Calvin Tomkins, *Duchamp: A Biography* (Museum of Modern Art, 2014), 298.

drawing, producing enough work to assemble a portfolio that secured his admission to the fine arts program at Sir George Williams University (now Concordia University) upon his return to Montréal in the summer of 1968.

For the next two years, Dean studied under artist Gary Coward, a Marxist/Maoist painter, sculptor, and agitator active in the conceptual art scene at the time. Only seven years Dean's senior and not yet thirty himself, Coward was navigating his own formative artistic years alongside his students. His experimental pedagogy, exemplified in his Core Workshop, where students were free to come and go as they pleased upon registering, eventually irritated other faculty members and nearly cost Dean and his cohort their graduation in 1970, a decision that was later overturned. Coward's mentorship and friendship left a lasting impact on Dean's practice, shaping his approach to art as a space for interrogation and radical experimentation.

In 1971, Coward co-curated *45°30'N-73°36'W*, a landmark conceptual art exhibition, alongside American expatriate and critic Arthur Bardo—a former New Yorker and a friend of Lucy Lippard's—and artist Bill Vazan. The exhibition positioned Montréal within the international conceptual art movement, presenting Dean and his peers alongside key American figures such as Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler, Sol LeWitt, and Lawrence Weiner, as well as Canadian avant-gardists including David Askevold, Greg Curnoe, N.E. Thing Co., Michael Snow, and Ian Wallace.

This was not Tom Dean's first appearance in a major exhibition. A year earlier, two of his student works had been included in *Realism(e)s*, an exhibition that toured from the Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal to the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto. They were selected by American curator Mario Amaya, then chief curator of the Art Gallery of Ontario, who famously introduced himself as “the man who was in the room when Andy Warhol was shot.” One of the two works, *970 Market St.* (1969–70), was later acquired by the Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal.

Painted in a hyper-realistic manner using acrylic on canvas, *970 Market St.* took Dean eight months to complete. Consisting of four panels, the work, from a distance, appears identical to the linoleum floorboards at 970 Market St. in Victoria, where Dean stayed while taking a painting course at the University of Victoria in 1969. At the time, he was contemplating abstract expressionism while documenting his thoughts, akin to an analytical idealist, and questioning the meaning of reality:

The artist's reality—creating consciousness: his action is his perception, which creates reality; the perceived reality also creates him.<sup>3</sup>

Yet in the end, through the mirrored view rendered by his own actions, he wondered:

In the passivity of this environment, this painting was created—an environment where action was not motivated by any moral or physical necessity, and where a cultural landscape catered to passive existence.

Instruments such as television, recorded music, and drugs allowed a passive relationship to reality.<sup>4</sup>

While *970 Market St.* left his questions confined to the notebook—engaging in theoretical questioning ultimately left meaning unresolved, suspended between representation and perception—the *GOOD-BYE* series (1970–71) enacted that doubt in material form, demonstrating the superficiality of meaning by reducing it to its most basic signifiers. Here, Dean systematically deconstructs and abstracts the act of bidding farewell, shifting meaning from textual representation to a purely formal and material phenomenon. Each stage strips language of its semantic function, revealing that meaning is not inherent but contingent—a fragile surface that can be manipulated, emptied, or erased altogether.

In *GOOD-BYE #1*, the word “GOOD-BYE” appears in its literal form, spelled out in all caps and shining sequins, painstakingly sewn by Dean himself, but retaining its linguistic function, readable and directly communicative. In *GOOD-BYE #2*, Dean calculates the surface area occupied by the letters and translates it into a block of shadowed area made of hand-painted dots, stripping the word of its legibility while preserving its physical footprint. This transformation collapses the figure-ground relationship, as the once-distinct text dissolves into a dispersed field of marks. The text disappears, yet its presence lingers through the redistribution of materiality. By *GOOD-BYE #3*, the already abstracted dotted blocks are further manipulated into different geometric shapes, fully detaching the work from its original linguistic basis. At this stage, the formal elements exist independently, and any residual meaning is carried only through their history of transformation.

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<sup>3</sup> Tom Dean, studio notes, ca. 1972, from the artist's personal archive.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

Through this methodical unraveling, Dean enacts a conceptual disappearance: an erosion of meaning that mirrors the process of saying farewell. The phrase “GOOD-BYE” was first recognized, then dismantled, then displaced into non-representational forms, embodying his broader approach to meaning as superficial, fluid, and subject to systematic erasure or reconfiguration. The work also performs the blurring of subjectivity and objectivity—beginning as a deeply human gesture (a farewell) before being subjected to an impersonal, mathematical, and material-based logic that strips away traces of individual expression. A parallel conceptual and formal experiment in figure-ground relationships was later explored in a series of computer-generated drawings, which Dean developed in collaboration with a computer programmer at the time.

If the *GOOD-BYE* series enacts the disappearance of meaning, *Four Acts* (1971) exposes its superficiality—freezing disappearance itself into a passive state of suspension, a still-frame of loss. Using photo-silkscreen—a popular technique at the time, particularly within the conceptual art scene—Dean reproduced four sets of video stills and widely circulated images, transferring them onto raw canvas. The selected moments appear extraordinary, yet their repetition drains them of distinction: Otto Armin, a talented young violinist, playing Bach in Dean’s first video work, *Act of Art* (1971) shortly after winning a major prize in an international competition; the famous 1912 group shot of British explorer Robert Scott and his team upon reaching the South Pole, one month behind the Norwegian team and shortly before they tragically perished on their return journey—heroics that shaped Dean’s early imagination; a basketball game frozen mid-action, memorialized for the players’ skill; and a photo of an accomplished yogi meditating, likely sourced from a popular magazine or book. Each set contains three repeating shots of supposedly singular events, suspending them between heroism and pathos, spectacle and emptiness. Dean does not elevate or diminish them but instead flattens their significance through ambiguous groupings and mechanical reproduction—an act he self-termed “leveling”—revealing the precariousness of meaning itself. In *Four Acts*, as in *GOOD-BYE*, meaning is neither lost nor affirmed—it is held in a superficial, cyclical state, stripped of narrative resolution.

Exploring the instability of meaning and systems of representation, Dean also experimented with quintessential conceptual forms during this period. In *Four Corners* (1971), he examined mapping and spatial relationships through different modes of representation, documenting the four corners of his studio through three distinct but



overlapping methods: photography, perspectival drawings, and inflatables that restructured the volumes modeled by the drawings, which were themselves based on the photographs. As a studio activity, the work encapsulates his ongoing interest in the relationship between physical space, perception, and material translation.

In *100 ft. Line* (1971), the spatial game begins with a piece of information typed on an index card:

Locations for 100-foot lines. Ten matchsticks were scattered at random over the surface of this map to locate the lines. The map is of the area in which the artist lives. Scale—100' = 1'.

Following this chance-based mapping instruction, Dean translated these randomized lines from the conceptual framework of the map into physical space, staging site-specific urban interventions at the locations determined by chance. There, he materialized the lines with a 100-foot-long sandbag strip, bringing the abstract system of mapping into a direct confrontation with the built environment. By merging text instruction, chance operations, and real-world geography, *100 ft. Line* extended the logic of mapmaking into lived space, foregrounding the tension between arbitrary designations and physical reality.

Influenced by Lawrence Weiner's 36" x 36" *Removal to the Lathing or Support Wall of Plaster or Wallboard from a Wall* (1968)—featured in Harald Szeemann's seminal 1969 exhibition *When Attitudes Become Form* in Bern, Switzerland—Tom Dean's *St. Catherine St. Conduit System between Mountain and University with Cross-Section Detail at Each Manhole* (1970) explores the removal of pavement to document Montréal's underground infrastructure.

Beneath the surface, three interlocked grid systems—telephone, hydro, and sewer—are exposed, revealing an unseen network that, at first glance, takes on a mischievous attitude toward structure and order, echoing the spirit of irreverence in *When Attitudes Become Form*. Yet beneath this defiant stance lies a deeper sense of unease, as Dean's work exposes not just infrastructure but an ecosystem of decay—an artificial system designed to manage human excess while remaining fundamentally ignorant of nature's larger cycles.

The city is seen as a mini-macrocosm as a system. The utility system link[s] our functions with those of a larger system, making us organs within a larger organism. Bell telephone, hydro, water, sewage, gas, telegraph, police, closed circuit – the decaying culture available to us &

the landscape available to us is the urban environment.

It is the urban landscape, the mechanical system. I saw it as landscape painting. Constable, at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, was painting landscapes which celebrated the beauty of nature around him. A mild pantheism. His view was already somewhat nostalgic, for the industrial revolution was well on its way, the rape of the natural had begun.

Artists sometimes find their values in a dying system: the common place of one age becomes the art, the antique, of the next. Artists, by constantly displacing values, redeem history.

But nature become landscape is already nature raped; the sacred is secret, and nature as landscape is nature secularized, profaned. Nature as landscape became nature as real estate, the urban environment, nature regimented by the imperatives of money.

So the telephones and the sewers are ours, essentially robots built on the body of the rape victim to fulfill her functions. They form an ecosystem which is fundamentally ignorant, destructive, and unresponsive to the larger systems of nature. [. . .]

The rape victim is ourselves, as a part of nature, the mechanism we hallucinated to deal with our proliferation, our progress, is a cancer.<sup>5</sup>

Dean's engagement with systems and infrastructures positioned him alongside conceptualists but also set him apart. While many conceptual artists explored information, process, and McLuhan's dictum that "the medium is the message," Dean resisted the idea that these frameworks were neutral tools for artistic inquiry. Rather than using administrative aesthetics, language systems, or networks as self-contained investigations, he exposed their inherent contradictions—foregrounding failure, instability, and the unseen consequences of these structures. If conceptual artists like Joseph Kosuth and others turned to Austrian

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein to test the limits of linguistic meaning, Dean focused on how material and technological infrastructures conditioned experience itself. His work revealed that systems—whether urban, linguistic, or technological—do not simply mediate meaning but actively construct it. This attention to systemic breakdowns, often overlooked at the time, now resonates with contemporary critiques of the Anthropocene.

### From Sea to Shining Sea<sup>6</sup>

*St. Catherine St. Conduit System between Mountain and University with Cross-Section Detail at Each Manhole* was originally intended for the Twelfth Biennial Exhibition of Canadian Art at the Winnipeg Art Gallery, where Dean had been invited to exhibit. However, the piece was ultimately rejected. “I have just received a refusal of my work to the Winnipeg show. This after such a nice invitation. Apparently, they don’t like sewer maps,” Dean wrote in a letter to his parents, expressing his disappointment.<sup>7</sup> Instead, the piece found a home in *Concours artistiques du Québec ’70* at the Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal (MACM), an exhibition organized by the Ministère des Affaires culturelles du Québec. Founded in 1964 by the Québec government, the MACM was Canada’s first museum dedicated to contemporary art. Open to all Québec artists, the competition invited submissions of new works created after January 1969. Out of 300 submissions, nearly thirty were selected, including works by Dean’s teacher Gary Coward, Bill Vazan, and notable members of Les Plasticiens, such as Guido Molinari and Claude Tousignant.

At the MACM, the piece was well received, earning Dean one of the ten prizes awarded, along with a \$1,500 cash prize and a favourable mention from Norman Thériault, who was known for incisive reviews in the French-language newspaper *La Presse* and one of the country’s most

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<sup>6</sup> *From Sea to Shining Sea* (1987) was an exhibition and publication curated by AA Bronson of General Idea at The Power Plant, Toronto, chronicling artist-initiated activities in Canada from 1939 to 1987. While covering a broad historical range, its primary focus was on the late 1960s onward, particularly the rise of artist-run centres. The title, drawn from the lyrics of “America the Beautiful,” evoked a sense of vast national scope while subtly engaging with questions of cultural identity. René Blouin, a contemporary of Dean’s, compiled the Montréal section, highlighting Dean’s contributions to the emergence of the local contemporary art scene—particularly his role in self-publishing and fostering artist-run culture.

<sup>7</sup> Tom Dean, *Letters Home*, December 16, 1970, from the artist’s personal archive.

insightful contemporary art critics. Yet, despite the recognition, Dean's response was ambivalent, as expressed in another letter to his parents:

It turns out to be not too bad a business, art. There is great opportunity for the opportunist in Québec; none of the young people are doing any good work. It appears it would be rather easy to lead the field. [. . .] I should be delighted, but all I feel is that I want to get out. I'm beginning to feel like I'm just fulfilling contracts, which destroys your freedom. I already find myself making things which are safe, which I know will be ok and can be finished on time, rather than taking chances and thus moving forward.<sup>8</sup>

Beyond mourning a loss of autonomy, Dean sensed that his growing artistic career was entangled with an underlying provincialism; in Québec, opportunities were abundant, yet the ease of success threatened to dull artistic risk.

Around the same time, for a few months in 1970, he took on a dual role as critic and journalist, covering the local art scene for the *Montreal Star*, the city's English-language daily newspaper, on the recommendation of Arthur Bardo. Bardo had brought a New Yorker's sensibility to the city's art criticism but left the paper earlier that year after encountering resistance.<sup>9</sup>

Looking back at Dean's short-lived—but prolific—tenure at the *Montreal Star*, where he sometimes published multiple reviews in a single day, one can trace the foundation of the artistic values that would shape his practice for decades. His writing emphasized new art—works that embodied a contemporary spirit, whether by young artists still finding their way or by senior artists reinventing themselves. He saw art schools as spaces for raw experimentation rather than simply for producing polished, professionalized work. Undergraduate students, in his view, embodied a sense of audacity through their messiness, approaching established forms with a kind of naïveté and openness, while MFA students often gravitated toward an image of professionalism—a formulaic approach that prioritized being “right” and “safe.” He championed small, genuinely experimental spaces where craft, design, art, and architecture intersected, in contrast to grand municipal exhibitions that, in his eyes, sacrificed artistic integrity for

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<sup>8</sup> Tom Dean, *Letters Home*, Labour Day Monday, 1970, from the artist's personal archive.

<sup>9</sup> Allen Harrison, “Away from Provincialism,” *Montreal Star*, June 13, 1970, 53.

cultural propaganda. He also valued youth-governed co-op models that not only supported young local artists in their production but also provided them with exhibition opportunities.

Dean's final act at the *Montreal Star* was, apparently, a review of his own show at MACM—but in the form of an intervention. Instead of burying it in the usual text-heavy review format, he collaborated with a photographer to produce a full-page photo essay titled “Quebec’s Folly,” juxtaposing installation shots of works he cared about with glimpses of the unassuming, mundane urban landscapes around the MACM—scenes that, to him, held a quiet charm. The piece opened with a pointed critique:

Québec has a Minister of Cultural Affairs. He has brought us a very nice Museum of Modern Art in a very bad location. He allows it a rather limited budget. The museum uses this budget with no particular imagination or efficiency. What is finally demonstrated, however, is not the failure of the Ministry of Culture or of the Museum, but the lack of any viable art scene in Québec. The Concours show, presently at the museum, is adequate testimony to this. The plasticiens no longer represent a contemporary movement, but no one in Québec has yet come forth with work consistent and strong enough to replace them. Of the few important younger artists in the show, more intend to leave Québec in the near future.<sup>10</sup>

When it came to his own work, he bypassed critique entirely, instead using the space to lodge a complaint about its presentation:

This is the wrinkled edge of one of Tom Dean's canvases. The shadows are not too bad, but Mr. Dean would rather see his canvases neatly stretched. Museum officials agreed to do so, but never did get around to it.<sup>11</sup>

Unsurprisingly, this swan song led to Dean's dismissal from the *Montreal Star*; despite strong support from the art community, including a protest from Gary Coward to the paper's management.

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<sup>10</sup> Tom Dean, “Quebec’s Folly,” photographs by Margaret Clark, *Montreal Star*, October 17, 1970, 62.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

From that point on, Dean turned to self-publishing, editing a series of independent publications. He began with the DIY artist book, *Easy Cheap* (1970), only to follow it with *Cheap* (1970-71) after realizing that DIY was not so easy after all. Assembled in loose-leaf notebooks through open calls for submissions, the format took inspiration from pioneering multimedia artist Dana Atchley's *Notebook 1* (1970)—a binder containing a mix of typed and handwritten texts, photographs, drawings, collages, and mail-art contributions.<sup>12</sup> A seminal work in the correspondence art movement, its modular structure allowed pages to be added, rearranged, or removed, reinforcing the idea of an evolving, interactive document rather than a fixed publication. In 1972, Dean founded *Beaux Arts*, considered the first English-language art magazine of its kind, primarily serving Montréal's anglophone art scene.

Through these publishing initiatives, Dean became embedded in a broader network of mail art and experimental publishing in Canada, linking his practice to Vancouver-based collective Image Bank and Toronto-based *FILE Magazine*—both which redefined the role of print media in conceptual and networked art. His involvement also led to personal friendships with artists associated with Vancouver's artist-run centre Western Front, including Michael Morris, as well as the members of General Idea, the collective behind *FILE*. The latter even redirected some of their grant funding to support the production of *Beaux Arts*.

Dean was also a founding member of Véhicule Art Inc., one of Canada's first artist-run centres, established in 1972 in a former auto repair shop on rue Ste-Catherine in Montréal. A hub for experimental practices in conceptual and process art, performance, video, and print, its founding collective was partly galvanized by the landmark exhibition *45°30'N-73°36'W*.<sup>13</sup> Functioning as both an artistic laboratory and a social space, Véhicule fostered a collaborative ethos that aligned with Dean's interest in self-publishing and alternative media. His involvement further cemented his role in Montréal's independent art networks, placing him at the heart of Canada's emerging artist-run culture—or, as Dean put it, the “Canadian artists grapevine.”

Starting in 1970, the grapevine Dean referred to was expanding at an unprecedented pace across the country, fueled by the Canada Council for the Arts' Special Initiatives Program, which supported

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<sup>12</sup> A limited edition of 242 notebooks co-created with artists Geoffrey Hendricks, Nye Ffarrabas, and Davi Det Hompson, were assembled and mailed out by Dana Atchley for Ace Space Co.

<sup>13</sup> Diana Nemiroff, *A History of Artist-Run Spaces in Canada, With Particular Reference to Véhicule, A Space and the Western Front* (National Gallery of Canada, 1984), 136.

emerging artist-run centres, and the efforts of Pierre Trudeau's newly elected government in gaining youth support through funding programs like Opportunities for Youth and the Local Initiatives Program. These grants encouraged socially innovative cultural projects, allowing artist-run spaces to flourish.

However, as these artist-led initiatives secured more funding, they also became increasingly institutionalized, adopting bureaucratic structures that, for some, conflicted with their original ethos of experimentation and independence. This tension—between autonomy and sustainability, grassroots energy and institutional survival—was an inherent contradiction within artist-run networks. Though still deeply involved in artistic production, from Montréal to Toronto, Dean distanced himself from the administrative side of artist-run culture. He stopped producing *Beaux Arts*, withdrew from Véhicule Art Inc., and avoided the growing organizational responsibilities that came with sustained funding. For Dean, artist-run culture was never meant to be an institution in the traditional sense but more of a social experiment—a space for spontaneity, collaboration, and, as he put it, “a good party.” He preferred to leave it as a wild grapevine rather than a carefully cultivated system, embracing its organic, unpredictable nature over structured longevity.

### An Apolitical Whistle Blower

Through the 1960s into the 1970s, Montréal was politically restless, with tensions peaking in 1970 during the October Crisis. While Dean and his circle led relatively carefree lives, they were sympathetic to the upheaval. He believed that Québec's deep-rooted social conservatism had contributed to the crisis,<sup>14</sup> a sentiment echoed in his reporting for the *Montreal Star*. After the 1973 Québec election, when the Liberal Party won decisively while the Parti Québécois (PQ) suffered a loss, Dean remarked—without logical grounding, as he put it—that he would have preferred to see the PQ win. At the very least, he thought, their campaign had been more creative.<sup>15</sup>

Meanwhile, Tom Dean was distancing himself from the growing institutionalization of artist-run culture. His reluctance to engage with bureaucratic structures was not simply a reaction against arts

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<sup>14</sup> Tom Dean, *Letters Home*, November almost, 1970, from the artist's personal archive.

<sup>15</sup> Tom Dean, *Letters Home*, November 3 and November 26, 1973, from the artist's personal archive.

administration but a deeper resistance to institutionalized meaning—the idea that art should serve external discourses, whether political, theoretical, or social. For Dean, meaning was not fixed or inherent but something actively shaped, eroded, or repurposed. Just as he had deconstructed language in the *GOOD-BYE* series and exposed systemic fragility in his urban mappings, he approached ideological structures with the same skepticism.

This resistance came to a head in 1971, when he enacted what may have been his most direct confrontation with the idea of art as social responsibility. Alongside the 1971 exhibition *45°30'N-73°36'W*, a two-day conference, titled “Art and Social Responsibility,” brought together artists and community members, with presenters from across Canada and the United States. During the event, Dean sparked controversy—a moment he later recounted to his parents:

I recently contributed to my notoriety by disrupting a large conference on Art and Social Responsibility. Anticipating that it would be nothing but an indulgent exercise in the comfortableness of group activities [. . .] I came with about 2 dozen whistles and horns, which I handed out to people as they came in. As the panel discussed [. . .] there was a continuous indiscriminate background of whistling. People starting yelling for us to get out, saying there were people with serious intent here, and they needed none of this nonsense, and why didn't we come up and say something if we objected, people came back and threatened us, took whistles away from girls and little people (they were scared of me), guards were called, etc. etc. and disorder took over. Someone on the panel yelled he thought the whistles were as meaningful as anything bound to be said on the panel, and people yelled back that he was just publicity seeking. Peter London, a former teacher of mine, who organized this conference [. . .] was extremely upset and angry, people talked about conceit and imposition, democratic discussion. Everybody but me was intimidated into silence finally and the panel proceeded, bickering about who was the better critic.



One interesting development, London talked to me a few days later and thanked me for the whole thing, saying he had just seen the video tapes of the whole thing and had changed his mind, that the whistling was the most meaningful communication that went on.<sup>16</sup>

Dean's intervention was neither a political protest nor a rejection of the conference's premise; rather, it was an assertion of his belief in *absolute art*—a term he would later define as a personal possession, unburdened by social, political, or ideological imperatives:

The only art I care to make is that which comes from intense personal experience. [. . .] My art is always attempting to be as romantic (heroic) as possible within its moral obligation to farce, dead ends.<sup>17</sup>

If the conference sought to define art's role within a larger social fabric, Dean's disruption posed a counterpoint: What if art's highest responsibility was to itself?

While many of his peers viewed art as a tool for activism, Dean resisted the notion that artistic production should be tethered to political movements or collective struggles. His act of indiscriminate whistling—both disruptive and absurd—stripped the conference of its structured seriousness, transforming it into an unpredictable social experiment. Was this an affront to those seeking to discuss art's societal role? Or was it, paradoxically, the most direct demonstration of art's capacity to destabilize?

Dean's skepticism toward art's entanglement with activism was not born of indifference but from a deep-seated wariness of institutionalized discourse—whether in politics, academia, or the art world itself. By staging a confrontation that forced participants out of their rhetorical comfort zones, Dean exposed the fragility of such discussions: the moment they were disrupted, they crumbled into personal accusations, intimidation, and power struggles. The irony was not lost on him.

The aftermath, as recounted in his letter, underscored his position. Peter London, initially outraged, later reconsidered his stance after reviewing the video footage, admitting that the whistles had been

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<sup>16</sup> Tom Dean, *Letters Home*, March 7, 1971, from the artist's personal archive.

<sup>17</sup> Tom Dean, studio notes, undated (1970s), from the artist's personal archive.

“the most meaningful communication that went on.”<sup>18</sup> In Dean’s view, this was perhaps the highest praise—an acknowledgment that meaning in art did not emerge from earnest declarations but from ruptures, from friction, from the unfiltered collision of forces. From the error and the offense toward farce, the dead end.

## Ending

In 1976, Tom Dean took up a teaching position at the Ontario College of Art (OCA, now OCAD University) and moved to Toronto. This brought his formative years in Montréal—a period that, in some ways, echoed Marcel Duchamp’s early artistic life—to a close. Duchamp spent nearly a decade practicing various painting styles—from academic realism and naturalism to post-impressionism, fauvism, and cubism—later referring to those years as “eight years of swimming lessons”<sup>19</sup> that prepared him to develop his own formal language, one that ultimately rejected the retinal in favour of intellectual engagement, remaining in a constant state of evolution. Dean’s early years followed a similar course: from conceptual mappings to acts of refusal, from leveling meaning to dissolving it altogether.

Dean’s first course at OCA was called Concept Development: or What’s the Big Idea? Its description—a seven-page document, poetic and philosophically dense—would likely fail an accessibility test today. At the end of it, he wrote:

The artist is supposed to be a sensitive consciousness: more entirely in touch with the fullness of what is going on. That is his burden and responsibility as a programmer of the new body.<sup>20</sup>

At first glance, this instruction, delivered in a tone resembling a manifesto, might seem cryptic or self-mythologizing. Yet, in light of his trajectory—from entrepreneurial provocations to absurdist disruptions, from conceptual inquiries to grand gestures—it signals not a break from his past but a distillation of it. Rather than abandoning the systems he once played within, Dean turned his attention to how they conditioned meaning, framing the artist as both participant and programmer.

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<sup>18</sup> Tom Dean, *Letters Home*, March 7, 1971, from the artist’s personal archive.

<sup>19</sup> Calvin Tomkins, *Duchamp: A Biography* (Museum of Modern Art, 2014), 43.

<sup>20</sup> Tom Dean, course outline, 1976, from the artist’s personal archive.

In the years that followed, Dean produced a body of provocative works—heroic yet romantic, as he had promised in his statement on *absolute art*. His trajectory culminated with his selection to represent Canada at the Venice Biennale in 1999, the last iteration held in the twentieth century.

Then, in 2000, a postcard arrived at his address in Toronto—one from his *Bleury, Canada Postcard series* (1969), which, along with *970 Market St.*, had been included in *Realism(e)s*, the first major exhibition in which he participated. In the style of photo-conceptualism, the postcard paired an unspecified, mundane image on one side with a nonspecific text on the other, alongside the phrase “REAL POST CARD.” The image was a black-and-white photograph of an assemblage sculpture made from a linseed oil can, metal wires, and a wheel that operated as a steam engine and was part of a larger operation. It was a functioning mechanical object Dean created during his studies in Gary Coward’s Core Workshop and is reminiscent of Duchamp’s meticulous engineering in the groom panel of *The Large Glass* (1915–23), where Duchamp designed mechanical components with both functional precision and conceptual intent.

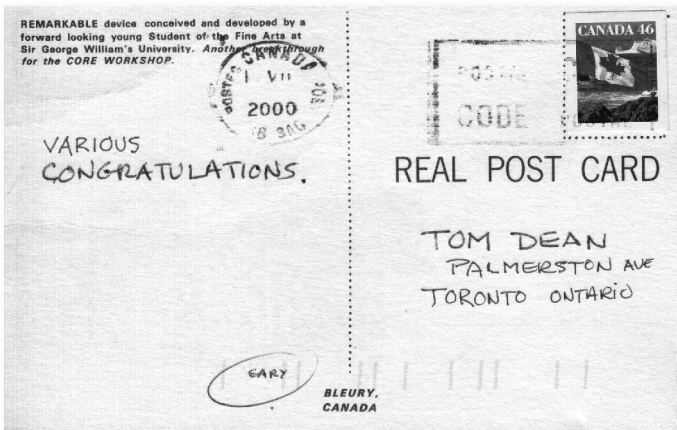
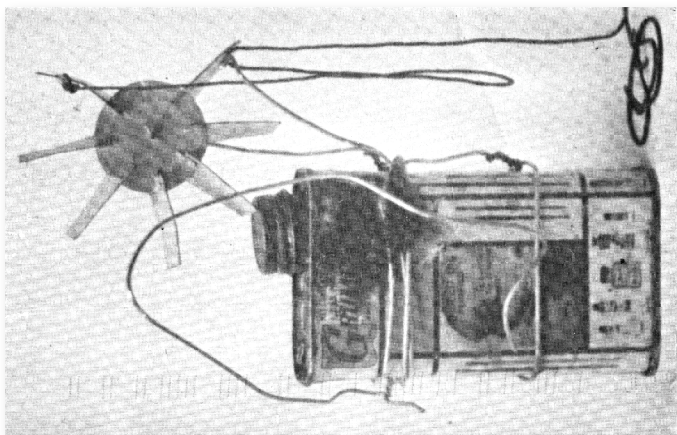
On the text side, it read:

REMARKABLE device conceived and developed by a forward-looking young student of the Fine Arts at Sir George Williams University. Another breakthrough for the CORE WORKSHOP.

The card was signed:

VARIOUS CONGRATULATIONS. GARY.

The gesture offered both closure and recursion—a return to the moment when Tom Dean was still assembling the tools of his artistic language, when meaning was something to be constructed, dismantled, and reassembled again.



Tom Dean, *Bleury Canada*, offset lithography, 1969.