

## Iain Baxter& POWER OF &

Iain Baxter& (also known as &MAN) is a tutelary figure of the artistic paradigm of the "critical companies". Since the 1960's, these entities have been emerging throughout the world as "companies" or "firms", managed by artistic entrepreneurs. If the aesthetic sphere where they evolved is close to the business world experience, "critical companies" also explore the political arena, often introducing unforeseen ideas and artworks. Iain Baxter&'s exhibition at the Sorbonne Artgallery is a highlight of the programming which focuses on presenting international artists questioning the links between art and society.

The history of Iain Baxter& unfolds in tandem with the history of contemporary business structure, which began during the economic boom of the 60's, a vigorous coming of age for the American corporation in terms of its geographic expansion and its presence in the media. Iain Baxter explains:

*"An artist in this marketplace environment relies ultimately on the charity of those who, for whatever psychological, sociological or other reasons, wish to 'support' the arts (we should add the economic motivation behind this ever since art has become the object of wild speculation). It is essential to free the artist from these constraints and allow the cultural knowledge he possesses to fuse with that of business, politics, and education."*

Thus, the creation of an artistic structure, taking as its model today's corporation, appears to be the most apt solution. By making a company out of art, the artist acquires an entrepreneurial status, that allows him to make the prerogatives of the business world his own, providing him with significant margin of maneuver.

Early in 1966, Iain Baxter& set up **N.E. Thing Company**, both a company and an oeuvre. In 1969, the *British Columbia Gazette*, a Vancouver journal that makes business transactions public, incorporated the company in its official register, a legal act that literally inscribed the artist gesture into the world of business, and simultaneously introduced the business world into the history of art. "Produce sensitive information" is the first prerogative and main objective of this pioneering company determined to get rid of that impassible divide that traditionally keeps esthetics and business apart. The firm was in activity for over a decade, staking out the territory that has made way for other more recent structures with similar ambitions. A provider of sensitive information of all kinds, N.E. Thing Company has also devised "sensitive information" experiments: an expedition to the Arctic Circle, business consulting services, as well as launching its other branches, the N.E. Photo Lab and the restaurant the Eye Scream.

To infiltrate the world of business requires devising a program that is both credible and viable. The creation of the company is the first step in concretizing what must be kept alive. Everything that needs to be taken or learned from business shall then be adapted to the (artistic) context of its implantation: logo, letterheads, stamps, slogans, posters, badges, etc... Art claims its right to be everywhere. "Art is all over", Baxter& insists. During the same year of its official registration, the firm set itself up in the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa, an unmistakably "corporate" environment: offices, busy secretaries, the president's office and other accoutrements of the working world, making for a disturbing transposition as much for the eye as for the mind. Entering this space was like walking straight into the breach where art stood holding its mirror up to the business world, and this breach has never stopped growing.

Reinvent the business and reinvent oneself as a business are what comprise Baxter&'s "global posture" he has adopted all this life - he sees it as permanent research to find new ways of navigating in his environment and of building adaptable solutions for living in the world. And this is exactly where he situates his field of action, in that greater landscape: that of the real world on which information fixes itself, information as the media-message formulated by Marshall McLuhan, whose thinking has clearly fused with the artist's vision.