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Scripting Artworks: Studying the Socialization of Edited Video and Film Installations

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Chapter 5

On Finding a Suitable Exhibition Format:

John Massey's *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)*

5.0 Introduction

In 1985, the National Gallery of Canada acquired John Massey's *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* (1982), a work that consisted of three projections of 16 mm films presented alongside each other with sound. *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* can be described as a fiction film, made in a road movie format, about the encounter of two men, a driver and a hitchhiker, the action of which is divided into three projections. The central color projection is a film presenting a continuous 30-minute conversation between the two men. The side black-and-white projections are silent films that serve to illustrate with texts and images what goes on in the driver's mind (left projection) and the hitchhiker's mind (right projection). *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* is a work on the impossibility of knowing what goes on in the minds of others and, consequently, on the challenges of understanding each other.

Even though the National Gallery of Canada's policy is to display its new acquisitions, once *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* entered the collection, it was put directly into storage. The work could not be exhibited, as it had, since its inaugural exhibition in West Berlin in 1982, a synchronization problem. The perfect synchronization of the three projections is crucial to the understanding of the piece as the side projections serve as "a linguistic interpretative play-off" and offer "a meta-dialogue to the central screen's 'true' account."¹ One could say that the support of the work – 16 mm films – and the equipment used to present it were inadequate. After being acquired, *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* disappeared from view for a period of about ten years until a group of mediators – the artist, curators and conservators of the National Gallery of Canada and other curators interested in exhibiting it – tried to find a solution to make it presentable again. As I will argue below, Massey's *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* is a work that was clearly defined conceptually in 1982, but did not reach a functional state until 1993-1994, and only in 2000 found a presentation format that was fully satisfactory according to the artist.

In this chapter, I reconstruct the life cycle of *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* using the method of *de-description*. This method serves to show which mediators have contributed to the shaping of the identity of the work. Like in the previous chapters, the *de-description* of the life cycle of this work demonstrates how artworks can change after their inaugural exhibition. This was done mainly from the presentation perspective in the chapter on Douglas Gordon's *Play Dead; Real Time* and the distribution perspective in the scripting

¹ Juliana Engberg, "As the Hammer Strikes," in *Cinema Paradiso* (Melbourne: Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, 2007): np.

of Mike Kelley's *Day is Done*. It follows, then, that in this chapter, it is primarily the preservation perspective that will be put forth. Indeed, it was the search for a suitable exhibition format that led to changes of carrier and changes in the display of John Massey's *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)*. In addition, because more and more video installations started to be sold in limited editions in the mid-1990s, *describing* the work makes one aware that its migration to a video format in 1993 challenged its status as a unique artwork. A tension built up between the National Gallery of Canada, which had initially acquired *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* in the mid-1980s, and the distribution system for video and film-based artworks that became predominant in the 1990s. This chapter scrutinizes the various attempts to transform this non-editioned artwork into an editioned one. The *de-description* also shows that it is not only about "editions," but also about different "versions," as the work has been through different states (filmic version, video version, digital version). Essentially, the method of *de-description* helps understand what *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* was back in 1982 and how it has developed into what *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* is now.

The first leading argument of this chapter is that since the preservation process made this work's re-exhibition possible, it has played a crucial role in the life cycle of the work. The second leading argument is that it might have become an editioned artwork, but it is also a work that has gone through many versions, a filmic version, a video version and a digital version. To support these arguments, the chapter has been divided into three sections. In the first section, the phases in the life cycle of *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* that are linked to its creation and its release in the art world are described. In this part of the chapter, I analyze how Massey attempted to give shape to an idea he had, how he initially worked with a form of technology that did not allow the artwork to happen (5.1). The second section discusses the migration of the work to a more recent format and the different configurations it went through over a period of 20 years before reaching a presentation format that has now persisted for 10 years. It points out how crucial this migration has been to ensure that *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* could finally be exhibited without any technical failure (5.2). The third section analyzes how the preservation strategy of the artwork – migration – challenged its status as a unique artwork. Different standpoints are compared: that of the institution that acquired the work, that of a curator that was involved in the migration of the work and aware of the costs involved, and that of the artist. It shows how influential the acquisition contract and the changed art market have been. It also demonstrates that because of the migrations, there is more than one version of *As the Hammer Strikes (A*

Partial Illustration). It is in fact a work consisting of multiple versions, all of which have contributed to defining what the artwork is (5.3).

5.1 Giving Shape to an Idea: John Massey's *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)*

This first section of the chapter covers the phases in the life cycle of *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* that are linked to its creation and its release in the art world. The *de-scription* of the making of *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)*, of its inaugural exhibition, of its second exhibition, and the analysis of its reception serve to make the scripting process visible. It also helps identify the mediators that have contributed to the definition of the work's identity. The purpose of this first part of the chapter is to show that despite the efforts of the initial mediators involved in the life cycle of *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)*, its support and its display in the exhibition space presented some challenges that eventually called for changes that would allow it to be exhibited as it had been conceptually conceived by John Massey in the early 1980s.

John Massey and the Making of *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)*

John Massey studied at the Ontario College of Art in Toronto from 1971 to 1974. At the time, Roy Ascott, a pioneer of cybernetics and telematics in art, was the president of the College. Under his leadership, the Ontario College of Art went through a radical pedagogical revolution, but this only lasted until Massey graduated. As John Bentley Mays writes, "At the centre of Ascott's program was a thoroughgoing critique of art and the art system, which cherished the subversive and perverse and intellectually rigorous, and left virtually no place for easel painting and formal sculpture."² In the 1970s, Massey primarily made installations and series of photographs. *The Embodiment* and *The Fire Room* were the first two artworks he exhibited publicly in Toronto in 1976.³ In his first installations, Massey explored, through different means, how we occupy space. In 1988, reflecting back on his artistic practice, he stated: "It has been the drama of how we do or do not grasp space as we stand within it that has led me to construct much of my work."⁴

² John Bentley Mays, "No Exit," *Canadian Art* 11, no. 2 (Summer 1994): 44.

³ They were shown in an industrial space that the artist had rented on the Ground floor of King Square, Toronto.

⁴ John Massey quoted in Gordon Lebrecht, "Some Thoughts on Twilight's Last Gleaming," *C Magazine*, no. 27 (Fall 1990): 35.

For instance, for *The Embodiment*, Massey built a room open only on one side, like a theater scene, in which he placed two beds of different sizes, one small and one big, and three lamps (Fig. 5.1). The first lamp was mounted on the left wall of the room, above the small metal bed. The light provided by its blue light bulb evoked the light of Blue Movies – pornographic films. In front of the back wall, in between the two beds, a floor-standing lamp served to lighten the entire scene. On the right hand side, close to the foot of the sculpted wooden bed, a heat lamp was melting the beeswax covering the bed frame. The light, the heat, and the smell conveyed signs of occupation, yet, no human beings were present in the room. The different sizes of the beds also brought in ambiguity. Though both beds seemed to be models of children’s beds, one was child-size, while the other was adult-size. It was left to the visitors to imagine who lived in that space and which activities took place in it.

Whereas in his first artworks Massey explored the occupation of space through installations and series of photographs, with *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)*, he explored mental space. More precisely, as he says himself in the artwork, he is “interested in how [his] mind works.”⁵ Prior to the creation of *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)*, Massey had been carrying around a tape recorder to keep track of exchanges he had with people he encountered. Among the conversations he recorded, one took place in his van after he had picked up a hitchhiker in Flesherton and dropped him off in Orangeville in Ontario, Canada. After transcribing the conversation, Massey re-enacted it with the help of a film graduate student from York University, Tony Sloane. In other words, *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* is the fictionalization of an actual event. Massey played his own role as driver and Sloane, the hitchhiker. To record the 30-minute conversation on film, the artist placed a camera at the back of the van. He also shot some footage from other angles, allowing, for instance, close-ups of the driver and the hitchhiker.

Presented in the exhibition space, the outcome is a triple projection with sound. The central color projection is the continuous sequence recorded from the back of the van. The two black-and-white side projections are the result of an editing process. Their purpose is to illustrate what goes through these two men’s minds. The left projection serves to depict what goes on in Massey’s head, while the right projection depicts what goes on in the hitchhiker’s head. Confronted with *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustrations)*, the viewers are not only witnessing a conversation, but they are given the impression that they know exactly what these men are thinking and imagining. The conversation the two men have, which is actually

⁵ Excerpt from *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)*.

quite banal, touches on various topics: where they live, where they work, strip-clubs in Toronto and things they have seen on television, among them, the TV show *That's Incredible*. The hitchhiker (H) has a speech impediment, which often forces the driver (D) to ask him to repeat what he just said. For instance, at one point, the hitchhiker, without any introduction or connection to what they had been talking about previously, describes what he had recently seen on television. The conversation goes like this:

- H. I watched th' increble one night. Wa'ch tha' increble.
Tha' – coupl' – ugh – last time – onysee, oh, last night.
This guy use'a. He's a torpedo – you saw tha' on TV before?
- D. A what?
- H. Torpedo.
- D. A torpedo, yeah.
- H. Guy's goin' on his back, steel plat' aroun' – ts.
- D. He was riding a torpedo?
- H. No, on th' motorcycle. He on the, th' back. He spa'.
- D. Oh, on the motorcycle. On a motorcycle?
- H. No. cnara', whatchacallit the racing car, o' some sort,
An' see – an' he go, hol' on the bla' handles.
Shshshshshshshshshshsh An' it start spark all shooti' all o'er the place.
- D. Oh, he was lying on the ground?
- H. Yeay. Wi' steel.
- D. Yeah – beng dragged along.
- H. Yeah – like a human torpedo.
- D. Like a human torpedo. I see. Oh yeah.
- H. So see – all this spark is shooting out. (*he chuckles*)
- D. Yeah. Amazing.⁶

When the hitchhiker asks the driver if he has ever seen a torpedo before, the sequence projected on the left screen shows a torpedo flying in the air. However, the images projected on the right are presenting a man wearing a suit and a helmet being dragged behind a fast car. There is a play in the work between the words spoken by the two men and the images that are used to illustrate what is being said. It is only after hearing a more precise description of what the hitchhiker saw on television that the driver understands that he is referring to a human torpedo. Once the driver understands what the hitchhiker is trying to describe, the sequences on both sides of the central projections become similar so that visitors will gather that the two men have reached a point of understanding. This is the moment that “the hammer strikes,” when the cognitive ignition occurs. To confirm this breakthrough, the three words “a human torpedo” even appear on the left projection.

⁶ The script of their conversation has been reproduced in the exhibition catalogue *This Much is Certain* (London: Royal College of Art, 2004). The excerpt copied here can be found on pages 134-135.

As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration) shares many features with road movies, but contrary to road movies seen in a cinema that consist of a single projection, Massey has extended the action of his road movie over three projections. This format of presentation gave him the opportunity to not only present to the audience a conversation between two men on the road, the central projection, but also to illustrate what was going on in these men's heads in the side projections. The audience is given access to their thoughts. The side projections, which complement the central projection, are examples of how human beings can have different interpretations of the same thing or how they can understand it differently. As the subtitle of the work indicates, what he is giving us is only "a partial illustration," as one can never fully grasp how his/her own mind works or anyone else's, for that matter. For instance, when the hitchhiker asks Massey where he works, the latter answers that he is an artist. Right away, the hitchhiker asks him if he makes a lot of money and what kind of art he does. When he wants to know if he makes "houses and stuff like that," the image seen on the right is a painting of a house surrounded by a landscape. As soon as the hitchhiker has said this out loud, quite a similar reproduction of a painting of a house in a landscape appears in the left projection. Then, when the driver states that he tries to make his work about how his mind works, the image used to illustrate that on the left projection is a photograph taken from Massey's 1982 series *The House that Jack Built*.⁷ On the right projection, as no images seem to come to the hitchhiker's mind, the image presented is not an illustration of what the hitchhiker imagines, but what he concretely sees at that moment: Massey driving the van.

The first time Massey had worked with film – for *Guidance* (1978) – he adopted the single-screen projection format.⁸ However, when looking at the creation of *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* in the continuity of his photographic work, which was always made up of series, it comes as no surprise that the action was divided into three projections. In 1981, Massey began working on the series of photographs *The House that Jack Built*, inspired by the nursery rhyme *This is the House that Jack Built*, a cumulative tale that does not tell how Jack built the house, but rather how different things, animals and persons are connected to that house.⁹ The series of photographs shows different angles of a model replicating the artist's studio at the time onto whose interior and exterior walls were projected various slides

⁷ Massey continued working on this series of photographs over the years and it now carries the date 1981-1992. The series now counts 23 gelatin silver prints, each measuring 30,5 x 48,3 cm.

⁸ *Guidance* (1978), black-and-white 16 mm film, 20 minutes.

⁹ The nursery rhyme has been reprinted in the exhibition catalogue *John Massey. The House that Jack Built* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 2004), 34. The nursery rhyme begins as such: "This is the house that Jack built. // This is the malt / That lay in the house that Jack built. // This is the rat / That ate the malt / That lay in the house that Jack built."

illustrating the nursery rhyme. Massey states, “At some point I realized that I was identifying with the small volumetric space as if it were a surrogate for the inside of my head. I had made a room ... a physical interior that could act as a psychic interior.”¹⁰ The exploration of his psychic interior continued with *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)*, this time through a tripartite film projection. Whereas the series of photographs such as *The House that Jack Built* were used to illustrate a story that unfolds over time and the photographs are organized in a specific order, in *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)*, Massey worked with the notion of simultaneity. Different actions occur at the same time and the viewer has to decide where to look as three versions of the story unfold in front of him/her at the same time.

The Inaugural Exhibition of *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)*

In the previous chapters, it was shown that the inaugural exhibition is crucially important, being the moment of release of the artwork into the art world. In the case of Douglas Gordon’s *Play Dead; Real Time* and Mike Kelley’s *Day Is Done*, the inaugural exhibitions are the references when it comes time to re-exhibit these works. They were landmark exhibitions, especially in the case of *Day Is Done*, as the project got fragmented afterwards. In the case of Gordon, the major change after the inaugural exhibition was that it was no longer displayed in the location it was shot, and, therefore, the dialogue with the exhibition space could not be maintained. The case of John Massey’s *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* is different for many reasons. First, contrary to Gordon and Kelley who showed their works in solo exhibitions, Massey first presented *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* in a group show that received extremely unfavorable criticism. The context of the reception of his work was different since the public was attending an exhibition on Canadian art and culture rather than coming to see the artist’s most recent work, as in the case of Gordon and Kelley. Second, as the *de-description* below shows, the conditions of the inaugural showing of *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* were far from optimal. In fact, one could state that its inaugural exhibition was a counter-example, showing how this mediator caused the work’s disappearance. The *de-description* of the inaugural exhibition reveals that the medium used by the artist was inadequate but also that the requirements he had for the display of his work were not respected by the organizers of the exhibition *OKanada*.

¹⁰ John Massey, “The House that Jack Built,” *Cybermuse*, accessed July 4, 2011, http://cybermuse.gallery.ca/cybermuse/showcases/meet/artist_e.jsp?artistid=3579.

Upon the invitation of Pierre Théberge, then the Chief Curator at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Massey presented *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* in *OKanada: An Exhibition of Canadian Culture* at the Akademie der Künste in Berlin in 1982-1983. The exhibition *OKanada* was accompanied by an extensive program of performances and films, and aimed to present Canadian art and culture to the German public. *OKanada* gathered the work of about 100 artists of various disciplines: architecture, visual arts, music, video, film, literature, dance and theater. The corpus of works on display covered a wide historical period, from 1830 to 1982. The exhibition was divided into three sections: *Historische Malerei Kanadas 1830-1975* [Canadian Historical Paintings 1830-1975], *Nördliche Polaritäten: Architektur in Kanada seit 1950* [Northern Polarities: Architecture in Canada since 1950] and *Zeitgenössische Bildende Kunst in Kanada* [Contemporary Art in Canada]. This last section was divided into three parts: *Structures*, *Video*, and *Performance*. Pierre Théberge was the curator of the part of the exhibition entitled *Structures* which comprised Betty Goodwin's *In Berlin, A Triptych: The Beginning of the Fourth Part*, Max Dean's *Telefon-Projekt* and John Massey's *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)*. One year before the exhibition took place, all three artists visited Berlin to study the city and the exhibition site. They were asked to consider this environment in the making of their works for *OKanada*, to take into account the "physical space available; the nature and dimensions of the designated area."¹¹ When viewing Massey's *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)*, it is hard to identify which elements were inspired by his trip to Berlin, since the action unfolds on a North American road. Moreover, in their exchange, the protagonists discuss topics that a German audience could have difficulty connecting with, such as the roads in Ontario, the TV show *That's Incredible* and strip clubs in Toronto. Of course, to the artist's credit, the work is much more complex, as the focus is not these very banal topics, but rather how the human mind works. For viewers, however, the difficult English and the subjects of conversation made *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* challenging to grasp at first.¹²

In terms of the presentation of the work in the exhibition space in Berlin, *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* required the construction of a room. Three months before the opening, curator Pierre Théberge sent instructions and a floor plan drawn by Massey to the staff of the Akademie der Künste (Fig. 5.2). These instructions are among the first instantiations of the artwork's script. The requests of the artist were the following: an

¹¹ See file 1227-02 of the exhibition *OKanada* in the archives of the Akademie der Künste, Berlin. [Archives consulted on March 25, 2011.]

¹² See for instance: Stephen Godfrey, "Why did OKanada exhibit fail so miserably?," *Globe and Mail*, February 19, 1983.

obscure and well soundproofed room in order to avoid the sound spreading into Betty Goodwin's installation, the construction of a projection room for the three projectors, three screens of about 2.5 meters wide, chairs for the visitors in order for them to be comfortable to watch the approximately 30-minute piece, and finally, the planning of projections at fixed times and the hiring of a projectionist.¹³ These prescriptions were to be executed prior to the artist's arrival in Berlin for the installation of his work. A few days before the opening of the exhibition, the artist came to install his work. To synchronize the three projections, Massey had devised his own synchronization system. He had installed a rubber strap around each of the three projectors' motors (Fig. 5.3).¹⁴ Each strap was attached to a pivot and each pivot was attached underneath the table by two other rubber straps. The customized mechanical system made it almost impossible to maintain the synchronicity of the three projections; it did not work properly and kept breaking.¹⁵ As the excerpt of the following letter bears witness, the projection system encountered difficulties early on. Soon after Massey left Berlin after installing the piece, Nele Hertling, Research Assistant at the Department of Music and Performance Arts at the Akademie der Künste and coordinator of *OKanada*, informed him that the projection system had broken down. In a letter addressed to Jörn Merkert, the Scientific Secretary of the Fine Arts Department at the Akademie der Künste, dated December 30, 1982, the artist wrote:

[Hertling] told me that a new system had been substituted for mine and that it was her feeling that its operation was superior to mine. If this is true I am deeply grateful and regret the malfunctioning of my own. She has also told me that the films were out of commission for not more than a day and a half. This too I am most thankful for.

Massey also indicated to Merkert that it would be helpful to him to know what kind of system was used to replace the synchronization system he had made.¹⁶

The technical problems encountered during the inaugural exhibition of *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* resulted in changes in the equipment used to display the work and its script. Indeed, the prescriptions accompanying the work had to be changed. This letter shows that it is not the artist who was behind the changes, but he was consulted and did agree with them, as they enabled his artwork to be exhibited. By contacting the Akademie der

¹³ Letter of Pierre Théberge to Jörn Merkert (Scientific Secretary of the Fine Arts Department, Akademie der Künste), 24 September 1982. (In French.) See file 1227-03 of the exhibition *OKanada* in the archives of the Akademie der Künste, Berlin. [Archives consulted on March 25, 2011.]

¹⁴ *OKanada*, Akademie der Künste, Berlin, 5 December 1982 – 30 January 1983. Curator of the part of the exhibition in which Massey's work was presented: Pierre Théberge.

¹⁵ See curatorial and conservation files of *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)*, National Gallery of Canada. [Files consulted on July 25, 2007.]

¹⁶ Letter of John Massey to Jörn Merkert, December 30, 1982. (In English.) See file 1227-02 of the exhibition *OKanada* in the archives of the Akademie der Künste, Berlin. [Archives consulted on March 25, 2011.]

Künste, Massey was trying to understand how its staff had modified the synchronization system. The staff – acting here as influential mediators in the life cycle of *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* – modified the customized system created by the artist, as it had failed to maintain the synchronicity of the three projections. This change introduced is what Madeleine Akrich would call, in the field of the sociology of technique, an “adaptation,” which involves the introduction of a few modifications in the device that entitles an adjustment to its environment without affecting its primary function.¹⁷ Applying this concept to the situation of Massey’s *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)*, it can be said that certain mediators involved in the life cycle of this work – more precisely the staff of the Akademie der Künste – modified the customized projection system of the work built by the artist in order to ensure that the three films would unfold in synchronicity for the time of the exhibition. When creating the artwork, Massey first had a concept in mind, made the three different films and then built a synchronization system. As the initial synchronization system broke down, modifications had to be made in order to have the technology satisfy the artistic concept. The adaptation of the customized system by some mediators modified how the system was used, but not its purpose. Still, this adaptation was a short-lived one, as it sometimes failed to maintain the synchronicity of the three projections.¹⁸ It was a temporary adaptation that occurred in the life cycle of *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)*.

The Reception of the Inaugural Exhibition of *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)*

During the scripting process, the analysis of the reception of an artwork is important, as exhibition reviews play a double role and both of their roles are exploited here during this process. First, they are important mediators since they frame the meaning of the work and thus influence its identity. Second, they are a source of information and can help identify other mediators who had influences on the life cycle of an artwork. In the previous section, I demonstrated that during its inaugural showing, *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* encountered technical difficulties, and, as the examination of the exhibition reviews points out, the soundtrack of the work provided another problem. This information is made clear only through the analysis of the exhibition reviews and essays written on Massey’s work. In one of the later essays, Peggy Gale recalls that the soundtrack was muffled and that the breakdown seemed imminent, either because of the failure of the equipment or through “a

¹⁷ Madeleine Akrich, “Les utilisateurs, acteurs de l’innovation,” *Éducation permanente*, no. 134 (1998): 83.

¹⁸ See information on the synchronicity problems of the work in the 1980s in the curatorial and conservation files at the National Gallery of Canada. [Files consulted on July 25, 2007.]

rupture of the communication between driver and passenger on-screen.”¹⁹ Gale contended that, “There was always the easy option of moving on to the rest of the exhibition, abandoning the clumsy conversation as inconclusive.”²⁰

Generally speaking, the visual art section of the exhibition *OKanada* was panned by the German critique. An extremely negative review by Heinz Ohff, Berlin’s most widely read critic, published on the very first day of the exhibition in Berlin’s largest and most prestigious newspaper, *Der Tagesspiegel*, set the tone for the subsequent critical reception. As Stephen Godfrey pointed out, “that was an immediate kiss of death.”²¹ Heinz Ohff contended that the show was “uninspired, uninformative, nonsensical and badly made.”²² The German critic condemned the democratic approach of having so many curators involved since the consequence was a show that went in all directions. Ohff also wondered why Canadian artists who had already exhibited in Berlin, such as Alex Colville and Mark Prent, had not been included in *OKanada*.²³ But for the organizers of this exhibition, the fact that Colville and Prent had already shown their work in Berlin was the very reason they were omitted.²⁴

In most of the reviews, the section curated by Pierre Théberge was among the most criticized. For instance, Michael Nungesser qualified this part of the exhibition as disappointing and problematic, and stated that the selection of artists seemed random.²⁵ In his article “Why did *OKanada* exhibit fail so miserably?,” Stephen Godfrey wrote:

Miss Hertling agrees there were disappointments in the visual arts section. For example, of the three installations which comprised the contemporary art section, one by Max Dean involving a cluster of telephones didn’t work because of the differences in hardware in the two countries, while Miss Hertling said the three-screen installation by John Massey was nearly unintelligible because it relied heavily on a colloquial English soundtrack.²⁶

These reviews of *OKanada* highlight the technical problems that the artworks faced in Berlin, but they also provide reasons as to why they were not understood by the public. For instance, in the case of *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)*, not only did one of the protagonists of the film have a speech impediment, but the type of language used by the two

¹⁹ Peggy Gale, “To Put into Visible or Concrete Form,” in *John Massey* (Hamilton: Art Gallery of Hamilton, 1994), 15.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Stephen Godfrey, “Why did *OKanada*.”

²² Heinz Ohff, “Au Kanada!” *Der Tagesspiegel*, December 5, 1982. In German, the words used by Ohff are “uninspiriertes, uninformatives, unsinnliches, schlecht gemachtes.”

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Stephen Godfrey, “Why did *OKanada*.”

²⁵ Michael Nungesser, “*OKanada* – kontrovers Akademie der Künste – West-Berlin,” *Kunstforum* 58 (1983): 176.

²⁶ Stephen Godfrey, “Why did *OKanada*.”

men in their exchange was challenging to understand. Therefore, one can wonder to what extent Massey kept in mind one of the requests of the organizers of the exhibition asking artists to consider the cultural polarity between Canada and Germany and “how their art would be interpreted by a foreign public which might not understand the artistic and intellectual context in which the works were created.”²⁷ What the reviews of the exhibition reveal is that Massey’s work had been understood conceptually; as in almost all cases the artwork is accurately described. For instance, Camilla Blechen wrote that “John Massey presents a film study of misunderstandings between a hitchhiker and a truck driver,” but the use of colloquial language turned out to be a barrier for the general public.²⁸

In an interview given years later, John Massey contended that “*OKanada* was like suicide.” The artist found the experience very difficult because of “the vociferous dismissal of *As the Hammer Strikes* by the German critique.”²⁹ Indeed, even if Massey’s work has been correctly described in the reviews of the exhibition, the critics of *Der Tagesspiegel* and of *Kunstforum* did not praise his work.³⁰ But as John Bentley Mays argues, “this rejection was also Massey’s first serious encounter with art-world fickleness and the unfortunate readiness of critics to mete out damnation to artists whose work they have not really comprehended.”³¹ Yet, when one puts in parallel the critiques of Massey’s film installation and of the *OKanada* exhibition in general, and the very topic of *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)*, Massey’s artwork is probably the work that illustrates best how difficult it is for two persons, and by extrapolation for two cultures, to understand each other. It takes time and a great share of mediation to reach the point at which “the hammer strikes.”

One of the recurrent criticisms of the exhibition is the lack of explanations.³² If we take, for instance, the contemporary art section in which Massey’s work was featured, it comprised only three artworks and the accompanying brochure included very brief and general statements on the three artists. It was only by reading the exhibition catalogue that the public could become acquainted with the artistic production of Betty Goodwin, Max Dean and John Massey’s work. As reported in the Canadian art magazine *Vanguard* in an issue where the

²⁷ Preparatory text of the section *Contemporary Art* of the exhibition *OKanada*. See file 1227-02 of the exhibition *OKanada* in the archives of the Akademie der Künste, Berlin. [Archives consulted on March 25, 2011.]

²⁸ Camilla Blechen, “OKanada in West Berlin a big show for a big country,” *The German Tribune*, 2 January 1983: 12. [Before being translated into English, Camilla Blechen’s article was initially published under the title “Die Rückkehr in die Stadt” in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, December 16, 1982.]

²⁹ John Bentley Mays, “No Exit,” 46.

³⁰ Heinz Ohff, “Au Kanada!” and Michael Nungesser, “OKanada,” 176.

³¹ John Bentley Mays, “No Exit,” 46-47.

³² See for instance Stephen Godfrey, “Why did OKanada.”

failure of the exhibition was examined, the indignation of the critics “aroused by having three installations fobbed off on them as – according to their expectations – the totality of contemporary Canadian art.”³³ In that same issue Heinz Ohff was asked to restate his position, first published in *Der Tagesspiegel* in 1982. The critic concluded his contribution by stating: “That *OKanada* will be remembered as one of the worst shows ever seen in the Berliner Akademie der Künste is due to a deficiency of informational content as well as the will to provide it. This event has hurt Canada and her culture rather than helped it.”³⁴

In comparison to the very positive reception of the inaugural exhibitions of Douglas Gordon’s *Play Dead; Real Time* and Mike Kelley’s *Day Is Done* analyzed in the previous chapters, the reception of the inaugural presentation of John Massey’s *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* was extremely negative. Also, as I will discuss later, Massey’s work was not immediately acquired by an institution, as it has been the case with Gordon’s and some of the offspring of Massey’s. Before integrating a museum collection, Massey’s film installation was exhibited again, this time in Montreal, where the critical reception was much more positive.

The Second Exhibition of *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)*

After Berlin, the section of the exhibition *OKanada* curated by Pierre Théberge was presented at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts under the title *The Berlin Project*.³⁵ John Massey’s and Betty Goodwin’s works were shown as they had been in Berlin. Since Max Dean’s work never reached a functional state, in Montreal, it was decided to present documentation on *Telefon-Projekt* rather than the project itself. The artists and Théberge had learned from what worked well in Berlin and what did not work at all. In Massey’s case, the *de-scription* of the inaugural exhibition has shown that despite the list of prescriptions sent by curator Pierre Théberge on the behalf of the artist a few months prior to the exhibition, some of his requirements were not respected. When it came time to exhibit *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)*, both the curator and the artist were better aware of how to display this work in order to create the conditions for a better reception.

In Montreal, Massey’s *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* was presented despite the fact that the synchronicity problems had not been completely resolved.³⁶ Critic John Bentley Mays pointed out in his review that the film featured “muffled but nevertheless

³³ Luke Rombout, “Okanada Reviewed. Introduction,” *Vanguard* 12, no. 5/6 (Summer 1983): 24.

³⁴ Heinz Ohff, “Okanada Reviewed,” *Vanguard* 12, no. 5/6 (Summer 1983): 27.

³⁵ The exhibition was held from 22 June – 4 September 1983.

³⁶ See the curatorial and conservation files at the National Gallery of Canada. [Files consulted on July 25, 2007.]

audible conversation.” He acknowledged that the acoustics of the room were much better in Montreal than in Berlin. The Toronto critic recalled that in Berlin, “the poor acoustics of the room in which it was shown made Massey’s arresting film incomprehensible even to people used to hearing English, Germans (and Canadians) could hardly be faulted for thinking it so much mumbo jumbo.”³⁷ In comparison, in Montreal, he stated that “John Massey’s marvelous film is enjoying the good acoustics it deserves.”³⁸

The reviews of *The Berlin Project* were much more positive than those of *OKanada*. The *Globe and Mail* critic nevertheless argued that the three works in the exhibition required “uncommon patience, and curiosity strong enough to carry the viewer through the heavy intellectual weather kicked up by the artworks to whatever resolutions and enchantments lie on the other side.”³⁹ The works on display were certainly not easy to grasp, but the reviewers still thought it was worth the effort. Bentley Mays argued: “Had they been so disposed, for example, the German critics could have seen in all three works an obsessive concern with communications – roads, specialized languages, passageways, telephones, Freudian slips, remote anonymity, misunderstanding – as a context, not merely a tool.”⁴⁰

When comparing the reviews of the two exhibitions, one of the main distinctions that stands out is the fact that the Canadian critics were familiar with the artistic production of Max Dean, Betty Goodwin and John Massey. For instance, in their articles both John Bentley Mays and Gilles Daigneault discussed the works exhibited in *The Berlin Project* in relation to what the artists had done previously. Critic Gilles Daigneault argued that *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* could be interpreted as insipid if not confronted to his earlier artistic productions.⁴¹ This point can explain the differences in the reception of the work in Berlin and in Montreal. The reviewers of the show in Berlin gave an accurate description of the work, but some of them did not appreciate it and could not situate it within the evolution of John Massey’s artistic production, in contrast to Daigneault who compared it to prior works of the artist.

According to John Bentley Mays, the new setting of these works in Montreal gave them strength. One of the reasons advanced by the *Globe and Mail* critic was that the exhibition space in Montreal was much more intimate than the one in Berlin. The latter was described as

³⁷ John Bentley Mays, “The Berlin Project serves as Vindication,” *The Globe and Mail*, July 23, 1983. Bentley Mays’ article subtitle was “*OKanada* art gains strength in new setting.”

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Gilles Daigneault, “Le ‘projet Berlin’ au Musée des beaux-arts,” *Le Devoir*, July 2, 1983. To solve this problem, the critic recommended the reading of Pierre Théberge’s essay on Massey’s work.

a “sterile, white gallery the size of a 747 hangar.” It was his opinion that the German exhibition space “could hardly have been worse.”⁴² From Bentley Mays’ review, one learns that the work gains from being in a room with good acoustics and in a more intimate space. Here again, the reviews of the exhibition are mediators in the scripting process, they contribute to the shaping of the identity of the work. They are also sources of information and allow the readers to identify other mediators that ought to be considered in the reconstruction of the life cycle of *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)*: the exhibition room and the sound.

The State of the Script After the First Two Exhibitions of *As the Hammer Strikes*

Earlier in the chapter, I mentioned that the instructions sent by Pierre Théberge, on behalf of John Massey, to the staff of the Akademie der Künste could be considered one of the first instantiations of the written script of *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)*. More precisely, they were *auctorial prescriptions* of tasks to execute to ensure adequate preparation of the room where the artwork would be displayed. The study of the first two manifestations of the work has shown that it gains strength if shown in a soundproofed room. This request was already integrated into the artwork’s script, but had not been respected in Berlin. This type of experience could serve to indicate to the artist which aspects to consider insisting upon when providing instructions for future presentations of this specific work. Unlike in Berlin, the work had a greater chance of being understood because the staff of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts respected this request.

A second point to be made is that at this stage, the physical state of the artwork was still not in line with the concept intended by the artist. Indeed, maintaining the perfect synchronicity of the work was a challenge. The adaptation made in Berlin by the staff of the Akademie der Künste was not a suitable long-term solution, as it did not succeed in perfectly synchronizing the three projectors. Therefore, the artwork needed to be partially rethought in order to make it possible to exhibit it again.

The first two manifestations of *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* can be qualified, using Gérard Genette’s typology, as *partial manifestations*, and more precisely, as *lacunary manifestations*, which is one of the two forms of partial manifestations. The other form is an *indirect manifestation*, as for instance Leonardo’s *Mona Lisa* in a reproduction. In a lacunary manifestation of an artwork, “some parts or aspects [...] are momentarily or

⁴² John Bentley Mays, “The Berlin Project.”

definitely inaccessible.”⁴³ During its inaugural showings, Massey’s artwork was at times momentarily inaccessible because of technical failures, but also because the sound experience was not optimized since exhibition space had bad acoustics.

Lacunary manifestations can occur at different moments in an artwork’s life cycle. Genette introduces the topic of the lacunary manifestation with the example *Venus de Milo* (circa 100 BC), now in the Louvre collection in Paris. The arms of this Greek sculpture made of marble, rediscovered in 1820 on the island of Melos, were never found. Therefore, the manifestation of this work in the Louvre is lacunary, as the arms of this sculpture are missing. The partial loss of this sculpture – arms, but also some metal jewelry and a possible polychromy – is the cause of its contemporary lacunary manifestation. When the audience faces the *Venus de Milo* as it is today it is visually obvious that this sculpture is missing some parts.

In contrast to this example, the first two exhibitions of *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* were lacunary manifestations due to technical failures rather than because of the effect of time, as it was the case for the *Venus de Milo*. The initial state of *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* – a film installation – did not give the artwork the possibility to “be” and also to be experienced by a public. Whereas the exhibitions of the *Venus de Milo* will always be partial or lacunary manifestations as some parts are permanently inaccessible, in the case of Massey’s *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)*, lacunary manifestations could cease to exist if the synchronicity problem was resolved.

The scripting of the first phases of the socialization of *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)*, namely its creation, its first two exhibitions and the reception of the work in these exhibitions, has revealed that the technology used to exhibit it contributed, at times, to making it disappear. The very socialization of the work was challenged by its medium. In the next section of the chapter, I continue the *de-description* of the work and study how the identity of the work changed in order to make it presentable in the exhibition space.

⁴³ Gérard Genette, *The Work of Art: Immanence and Transcendence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 211.

5.2 Finding a Suitable Exhibition Format

In the first section of the chapter, the *de-description* of the phases of the life cycle of *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* linked to its creation and its inaugural exhibitions served to identify the mediators that contributed to the shaping of its identity. It also showed that it was necessary to find a solution to the problem of the synchronicity of the projections. Moreover, it demonstrated that if the prescriptions provided by the artist in terms of the appropriate exhibition space were respected, the experience of the visitors was improved.

In this second section of the chapter, I focus on the phases of the life cycle of *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* that are related to finding a suitable exhibition format. The purpose of the second part of this chapter is to examine the changes implied by the migration of *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* to a video format. Again, the method of *de-description* helps identify the mediators that have played a key role in the migration process and also make the scripting visible.

The Acquisition of *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* by the National Gallery of Canada

Despite the synchronization problem and before any solution was envisaged for its long-term durability, the National Gallery of Canada acquired *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* in 1985. This meant that an important institution became a new and influential mediator in the life cycle of the work. Most influential, in fact, as among the functions of the museum, one can mention preserving and exhibiting the artworks that are part of their collection. By selling his work to the National Gallery of Canada, John Massey also transferred part of the responsibility of what would happen to *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* to another party.

As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration) was Massey's fourth artwork to enter the collection of the National Gallery of Canada. The institution had previously acquired the installation *The Embodiment* (1977), the film *Guidance* (1978) and the series of photographs and transparencies *Body and Soul: A Cinematic Stasis* (1983). In her acquisition report, Jessica Bradley, Assistant Curator of Contemporary Art, gave a thorough description of the work and argued that *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* was the artist's most ambitious attempt at bringing complex elements – experience and imagination, word and image, objectivity and subjectivity – “together simultaneously, engaging the viewer in an experience which unfolds in real time.” She also stated that it has been made with

“sophisticated technology.”⁴⁴ The purchase of the work included the customized synchronization system, four projectors, the internegatives and a set of exhibition prints (all of which were 16 mm films).⁴⁵ Nowhere in the acquisition contract or in any document included in the curatorial files can one find any indication that the institution was aware that the artwork was not in a state that allowed it to be exhibited since the synchronization problem was not yet resolved. Despite the policy that requires that the works be displayed after being acquired, *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* went directly into storage. The work had reached the point of being part of a museum collection, but paradoxically, it could not be exhibited because of the failure of the equipment used.

Exhibitions are key events in the life cycle of works of art, because if not exhibited, they are invisible. It was therefore necessary to come up with a solution. In 1991, John Massey wrote a letter to Diana Nemiroff, the Curator of Contemporary Art at the National Gallery of Canada, in which he stated “I am relatively sure that you have not shown this work since purchasing it. That is understandable since, in its present form, the piece is cumbersome.”⁴⁶ The artist later thought of a solution that would involve the transformation of the piece into a three-channel video installation. At that stage, he inquired if the institution was “sympathetic to the project.”⁴⁷ The artist’s motivation to make the piece functional once again came from his desire for it to be re-exhibited again, and was also rooted in the project of Ihor Holubizky, curator at the Art Gallery of Hamilton, who was organizing an exhibition presenting Massey’s major pieces, among them, *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)*.⁴⁸ Discussion began between the artist, Holubizky and the staff of the National Gallery of Canada. It addressed two main topics: upgrading the work to a more recent support and technology that would enable the perfect synchronicity of the three projections, and, the possibility of turning the work into an editioned artwork. The last topic will be addressed in the next section of the chapter; first, I focus on the migration of the work.

From a Film Installation to a Video Installation

After exchanges between all parties – artist, curator Ihor Holubizky from the Art Gallery of Hamilton and two curators from the National Gallery of Canada, Jean Gagnon (Curator of

⁴⁴ See the acquisition report of *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)*, dated March 13, 1985 in the curatorial file at the National Gallery of Canada. [File consulted on July 25, 2007.]

⁴⁵ Even if the work requires three projectors to be presented, an extra one was probably acquired in case one of the others needed to be repaired.

⁴⁶ Letter written by John Massey to Diana Nemiroff, July 22, 1991. See curatorial file, National Gallery of Canada. [File consulted on January 7, 2010.]

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

Media Arts) and Diana Nemiroff (Curator of Contemporary Art) – a preservation strategy was agreed upon. What the artist called a “video-disc reconstruction” at the time is nowadays referred to as a migration.⁴⁹ Migrating *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* implied upgrading the equipment used to support and present it. In May and June of 1993, the three 16 mm films were transferred onto Betacam tapes, which became the new masters.⁵⁰ The 16 mm audio track was first transferred to digital audiotape and then to Betacam tapes. As Betacam tapes slowly degrade every time they are played, laser disks were produced and served as exhibition copies. To solve the synchronicity problem of the three films, a PC-2 controller made by Technovision was used.⁵¹ Rather than trying to synchronize the projections mechanically – as was done in 1982 – this control device permitted the synchronization of the three films electronically. The result of this migration was the creation of a new “version” of *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)*, a video version. From a film installation, it had become a video installation. The term version has to be understood here as a new kind of physical manifestation of *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)*, that differs from the previous kind of physical manifestation, but that is the one that will be exhibited from then on, until, possibly, an updated version is made.

In most cases, the migration of an artwork occurs because the equipment ceases to work, because it is obsolete, or because the carrier is damaged. The change of carrier and of technology used to display it was necessary in the case of *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* not because the technology had degraded or because the reels of 16 mm were damaged, but because the work did not function properly in the first place. The 16 mm films were replaced by videos and the customized projection system and film projectors were substituted by a computerized synchronization system and video monitors.

The migrated version of *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* was first displayed in the exhibition *John Massey* presented at the Art Gallery of Hamilton in 1994 (Fig. 5.4).⁵² The migration to a video format was accompanied by a number of significant changes at the material level, at the aesthetic level and in terms of the configuration of the work in the exhibition space. In this particular case, the support of the work was no longer

⁴⁹ In the publication *Permanence Through Change: The Variable Media Approach*, the term migration is defined as such: “To migrate an artwork involves upgrading equipment and source material.” See: Alain Depocas, Jon Ippolito and Caitlin Jones, ed., *Permanence Through Change: The Variable Media Approach* (Montreal: Fondation Daniel Langlois pour l’art, la science et la technologie & New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2003), 126.

⁵⁰ See conservation file, National Gallery of Canada. [File consulted on July 25, 2007.]

⁵¹ A PC-2 Controller is a “programmable stand-alone control device, engineered to integrate a wide range of peripherals.” See Technovision website, accessed July 4, 2011, www.technovision.com.

⁵² *John Massey*, Art Gallery of Hamilton, Canada, 12 February – 24 April 1994. Curator: Ihor Holubizky.

film, but video; the films were no longer projected, but played on television monitors, which also affected the size of the images seen; the sound quality was improved; and rows of chairs invited the visitors to sit down at about the same level as the images displayed on monitors. The presentation of *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* did not encounter any technical problems in this updated format.⁵³

When the discussion took place between the different parties on a possible preservation strategy for this work by John Massey, the solution of the video reconstruction was quickly agreed upon and no party insisted on trying to find a solution that would allow the work to remain in a filmic state. The conservation approach shifted from the purely material – in this case film – to a conceptual approach. The *de-description* of the conservation approach of *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* shows that it was the identity of the work that remained the focus in this preservation process rather than its material constituents.⁵⁴ While deciding on a preservation strategy, what was discussed was finding a manner in which to synchronize the three films. The technology available at the time and the knowledge of the people involved in the discussion led them towards a migration to a video format. Their approach was to do justice to the work's concept, thus "over-ruling" its original material manifestation.

Among the disadvantages of migration as a preservation process is that it might change the appearance of the work substantially.⁵⁵ Despite the significant changes that occurred with the video version, critics lauded the transfer to video format. For instance, Peggy Gale, who had seen the inaugural presentation of the work in Berlin when it was still in its filmic state, contended:

The effect on the work is interesting. Instead of the somehow murky sound and image of the film – so appropriate to the dialogue and the bland passing landscape – and the veiled, distanced sense of events, the new format has sharpened and made immediate the information aspect of the piece. The viewer seems to take up a position *inside* the van's cab, no longer at arm's length. With the change of scale and the physical qualities of video, attention is more focused and the commentary of the two side-images assumes the character of an amused sequence of whispered asides, as though there were yet another companion in the cab. The clearer sound and the new precision of computer-controlled synchronized playback lend a quiet confidence to the presentation while the more intimate television screens renew a viewer's sense of participation in unfolding events.⁵⁶

⁵³ See conservation file, National Gallery of Canada. [File consulted on July 25, 2007.]

⁵⁴ This example is a great illustration of the conservation approach proposed by Pip Laurenson to deal with time-based media artworks discussed in Chapter One.

⁵⁵ See: Alain Depocas, Jon Ippolito and Caitlin Jones, ed., *Permanence Through Change*, 126-127.

⁵⁶ Peggy Gale, "To Put into Visible," 16.

This analysis of the migration by Gale points out the differences between the new version of *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* and the inaugural version. The migration of the work to a video format implied the loss of certain aspects of the work such as the texture of film and the unclear sound, which seemed appropriate to the work's content. Nevertheless, it also gained quite a few things in the process: the image and sound quality were improved, the synchronization of the three films worked perfectly, and the visitors were finally given the impression of sitting in the van with the two protagonists. As it was the case for the mediators involved in the conservation process of the work, for critics such as Peggy Gale and John Bentley Mays, it was also more important to preserve the concept of the work than its materiality.⁵⁷

A Third Version

Since the reception of the migrated version of *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* was so positive and the work had found a format that did not encounter any technical problems, one could assume that it had reached a "final" state, that no other modifications would be necessary until the technology failed again. However, regardless of the positive reception, this new version of the work, shown on monitors, was only exhibited twice.⁵⁸ In 2000, Canadian curator Ydessa Hendeles included *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* in her show *Canadian Stories: Ian Car-Harris, Max Dean, John Massey*.⁵⁹ For the occasion, Massey made the decision to project the three films rather than have them played on video monitors (Fig. 5.5). This change in the display of the work brought it closer to its inaugural presentation. However, the presentation was slightly different, since in Berlin, the films were projected on freestanding screens that were not in line, but at angles.

Being projected once again reinforced the cinematic features of the work and allowed for the projections to be blown up without being interrupted by the frame of the video monitors. This evolution in the display of the work was in line with the most common ways of presenting video-based artworks: in the 1980s and early 1990s on television monitors, and

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 11-19; and John Bentley Mays, "No Exit:" 43-47.

⁵⁸ After the exhibition in Hamilton, *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* was finally exhibited for the first time at the National Gallery of Canada in the show *John Massey: How my mind works* (17 July – 4 September 1995). Despite the fact that the institution also owned the filmic version of the work, it is only the "video disc reconstruction" that was exhibited in that institution as it was the one that had reached a functional state. The exhibition was curated by Janice Seline, assistant curator, contemporary art at the National Gallery of Canada.

⁵⁹ *Canadian Stories: Ian Car-Harris, Max Dean, John Massey*, Ydessa Hendeles Art Foundation, Toronto, 14 October 2000 – 30 June 2003.

from the mid-1990s, by means of projection.⁶⁰ The effect of intimacy created by the smaller image sizes of monitors was diminished, as the projections, which were not particularly large, were projected higher. Therefore, the visitors – now invited to sit on benches rather than chairs – were not given the impression of sitting at the back of the van. This display created a certain distance between the audience and the action taking place in the projected film.

In 2003, two loan requests from European institutions led the National Gallery of Canada to take the migration of the work one step further. Contrary to the migration of the work that took place in the 1990s that aimed to give the artwork a future life and that was led by a possibility to exhibit it again, I would qualify this second migration as a preservation strategy. The second migration was also aimed at facilitating the presentation of the work. In the description of the first migration done earlier in the chapter, it can be seen that, surprisingly, no conservators were involved in the decisions made regarding the artwork in the 1990s. The decisions were made inside the institution by two curators – one of them Jean Gagnon, a media arts specialist, the artist, and the curator of the Hamilton Art Gallery. The conservation department at the National Gallery of Canada was never involved. Also, the reconstruction of the work was not done within the institution. The 16 mm films were sent elsewhere (as they always are since the institution does not have the necessary facilities). But this step was mainly taken care of by the curator of the Hamilton Art Gallery. It was only in the year 2000 that conservators began to be mediators in the life cycle of this work.⁶¹

This second migration implied migrating the Betacam masters produced in 1993 to DVDs. Three sets were made: two for the National Gallery of Canada and one for the artist. The set that was given to the artist was for his personal use only and it was agreed that he would neither sell it nor show it publicly. Since 2000, every time the work has been exhibited – in Frankfurt, London, Ottawa, Vancouver, Berlin, Melbourne, Montreal and Glasgow, it has been projected onto a wall. These repetitive manifestations of *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* in the same manner and with the same exhibition support reinforce the fact that, about 20 years after its inaugural exhibition, it has reached a functional and satisfactory state. Its manifestations are no longer lacunary as the two first ones (Berlin, 1982

⁶⁰ On this matter, see Chrissie Iles, “Video and Film Space,” in *Space, Site Intervention: Situating Installation Art*, ed. Erika Suderberg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 252-262, and David Joselit, “Inside the Light Cube,” *Artforum* 42, no. 7 (March 2004): 154-159.

⁶¹ The late involvement of the conservators in the process can seem surprising. However, as Tate conservator Pip Laurensen indicates in an interview, in many museums, the curators of time-based media are also the ones responsible for their preservation. See: Julia Noordegraaf, “Chapter 9.4. Preserving and Restoring Media Art at Tate: An interview with Pip Laurensen (Head of Time-based Media Conservation),” in *Preserving and Exhibiting Media Art: Challenges and Perspectives*, ed. Julia Noordegraaf et al. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, forthcoming (2012)).

and Montreal, 1983) were. Finally, I would also call this most recent version of *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* the “digital version,” the version that followed the filmic version and the video version. This most up-to-date version of the work – that which is shown in exhibitions – is presented as three digital videos projected onto a wall.

The scripting done in this part of the chapter has shown the different steps that have led giving *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)*, first, a functional state, and second, satisfactory aesthetics, according to the artist. This section has focused on the study of the migration of the work, the change of support and the consequences for its display. In the next section of the chapter, I examine the implications of these changes on turning the work into an editioned artwork, but also how its different versions have been dealt with.

5.3 The Plural Immanences of *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)*

The migration of *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* to a video format in 1993-1994 contributed to challenging its status as a unique artwork, given that it happened during a period where video and especially video installations began being sold in limited editions. In this section, the *de-description* of *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* focuses on two main topics. First, it addresses how the Collection Management System of the National Gallery of Canada dealt with the different versions of this artwork. Second, it also serves to retrace and analyze the different attempts made to transform this non-editioned artwork into an editioned one.

Different Versions, Different Acquisition Numbers

The different material manifestations of *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)*, in addition to the different manners of presenting it in the exhibition space, helped define the ideal presentation requirements of the work. They also seem to suggest that the work has been through three different versions thus far: the filmic version (3 x16 mm film projections onto screens – 1982-1983), the video version (3 videos presented on television monitors – 1994), and the digital version (the work supported on a video format and projected onto a wall – 2000 onwards).⁶² All these versions carry the same title *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* and are all attempts to give shape, in the best possible (technical) way, to the idea

⁶² If I were to follow on Chrissie Iles’s categorization of video and film installation introduced in the first chapter, this third version of Massey’s work would be called the cinematic version. Whereas Iles named the three phases – phenomenological & performative, sculptural, and finally cinematic – influenced on how these works are displayed in the exhibition space, I describe here the three versions of *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* have evolved in technical terms.

that John Massey originally had at: trying to illustrate, “how his mind works,” as he says himself in *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)*. Again, using Genette’s typology, this work by Massey has plural immanences in the sense that it “immanates in several nonidentical objects.”⁶³ All these versions represented, at one point in time, the current materialized form of *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)*. They have all contributed to the shaping of its identity. This therefore demonstrates the relevance of studying the different versions of *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)*, as they have all contributed to its socialization.

The fact that the artwork has different versions that are all referred to as *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* is not how it is interpreted in the National Gallery of Canada’s collection management system. Indeed, the artwork has been granted two acquisition numbers, which gives the impression that the institution owns two artworks entitled *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)*. When the work was migrated to a video format in the early 1990s, a new entry was created in the collection management system. In the first entry (acquisition number 28799), the work is described as “one 16 mm colour film and two 16 mm b/w films, 30 minutes each, with three projectors and synchronizing system.”⁶⁴ When migrated to a video format prior to the 1994 *John Massey* exhibition held at the Art Gallery of Hamilton, a new entry was made in the National Gallery of Canada’s collection management system. The new version of the work was given the acquisition number 37971. The entry in the database also indicated that it was a video installation and that it was purchased in 1994. Over the years, the staff of the Collection Management Department tried to merge the two files, but this procedure was not authorized by one of the contemporary art curators.⁶⁵ Not only does the work now have two acquisition numbers, it also has two curatorial files, the first documenting the 1982 film version, the second, the video version. Despite its two acquisition numbers, only the most recent version of the work – which I have called the digital version – is the one being exhibited and loaned to other institutions. The version linked to the acquisition number 28799 will never be loaned or exhibited again.

In the case of *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* by dividing the history of the work and, in a way, not acknowledging its previous state, the National Gallery of Canada ignores part of its history, part of its life cycle. In the collection management system, rather

⁶³ Gérard Genette, *The Work of Art*, 163.

⁶⁴ See the public version of the National Gallery of Canada’s collection management system. Accessed July 4, 2011, http://cybermuseum.gallery.ca/cybermuseum/search/artwork_e.jsp?mkey=44753.

⁶⁵ See curatorial file, National Gallery of Canada. [File consulted on July 25, 2007.]

than defining the identity of the work based on its complete existence and its beginning as a “conceptual” project, the digital version of *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* that is now exhibited and loaned is dealt with from when its functional existence began, in 1993. The way the institution deals with this work shows signs of amnesia. By denying the existence of the filmic version or by being blind to the history of the work, the institution denies the fact that *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* is a work that has plural immanences; that it exists in different forms, even though only the most recent version is the one that is exhibited. The *de-description* done in this section has given a more complete view of how the work’s identity has been shaped over time. Furthermore, even though its support today is video, its presentation in the exhibition space remains how the artist had thought of it at first: the projection of three synchronized films that portrays the difficulty for two human beings to understand one another.

From Non-Editioned to Editioned

As stipulated in the acquisition contract of the National Gallery of Canada and signed by the artist in 1985, *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* was acknowledged as a unique work of art. At the moment of the migration in 1993, the artist and the curator of the exhibition at the Art Gallery of Hamilton, Ihor Holubizky, suggested the creation of an edition of three of the work: the first edition would be owned by the National Gallery of Canada, a second that would be owned by the artist and that he could eventually sell to an institution and a third would be owned by the Art Gallery of Hamilton.⁶⁶ In this way, the artist could benefit as more than one edition of the work could circulate, and it would also allow him to share the cost of migration with the National Gallery of Canada. This idea also reflects what was taking place on the art market, where video and film installations started to be released in numbered editions.⁶⁷ Discussions took place between Jean Gagnon, the Associate Curator of Media Arts, and Diana Nemiroff, the Curator of Contemporary Art. Both curators refused the proposal to turn *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* into an editioned work due to its status as a unique artwork. They used the acquisition contract as an argument, pointing out that it ought to be seen as an influential mediator in the life cycle of the artwork. Since the artist and the institution were legally bound by this contract, referring to it made it a strong argument. In 1993, the National Gallery of Canada provided the artist with a set of three laser

⁶⁶ See Ihor Holubizky’s letter to Jean Gagnon dated of February 3, 1993. Curatorial file, National Gallery of Canada. [File consulted on July 25, 2007.]

⁶⁷ See section 1.2 of Chapter One.

disks of the artwork and made him sign an agreement saying that they were meant for his personal use only and that the National Gallery of Canada must remain the sole distributor of the work. The acquisition contract played the role of an influential mediator in the life cycle of this work because it identified it as a unique artwork and therefore, could be used as an argument to prevent the work from becoming editioned.

At that point, tension built up between those in favor of the possibilities of duplication given by the migrated version of *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* and those preoccupied with the conditions under which the National Gallery of Canada had acquired the artwork. Creating more than one copy of the videos produced during the migration process would have been an easy task. When John Massey sold *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* to the National Gallery of Canada in 1985, no art dealer was representing him. *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* was Massey's first attempt in the world of film installations. He had previously worked with photographs, sculptures and installations. Despite the possibility of reproduction of films, he sold *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* as he had sold his other works: as a unique artwork.

In 2003, when the exhibition support of *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* was upgraded from laser disks to DVDs, the National Gallery of Canada provided a set of DVDs to the artist, and, once again, made him sign an agreement stating that the DVDs were "for the personal use of the artist only." The letter of agreement also stipulated:

As the Hammer Strikes was originally purchased with the understanding that it is a unique piece therefore the artist's copy of the work cannot be sold or shown in public. The National Gallery of Canada must remain the sole distributor of the work and all loan requests for this installation will continue to be referred to the institution.⁶⁸

Here again, the same mediator – the acquisition contract – was used as a justification to refuse to transform this non-editioned artwork into an editioned one. However, there is a contradiction taking place: on account of its numerous versions (filmic, video, digital), *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* can hardly be called a unique artwork. As shown earlier, the National Gallery of Canada has even attributed two different acquisition numbers to this work. In the 1990s, when the time came to find an exhibition format suitable to the artwork, as shown previously, the institution addressed this problem with a conceptual approach, rather than focusing on the materiality of the object. Paradoxically, when it came time to discuss the uniqueness of the work, the institution did not deal with the work conceptually, but used the old argument that *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)*

⁶⁸ Letter of agreement between the National Gallery of Canada and John Massey, signed by the artist on April 5, 2004. See curatorial file, National Gallery of Canada. [File consulted on 25 July 2007.]

was a physical object, like a painting or a sculpture. The National Gallery of Canada tried to “erase” a part of the life cycle of *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)*, to make it invisible.

In March 2006, John Massey approached the director of the National Gallery of Canada, Pierre Théberge, and asked him if the 2004 letter of agreement could be amended and if the copy for his ‘personal use only’ could become an artist’s proof (AP). This time, the National Gallery of Canada agreed to John Massey’s request. According to the emails included in the curatorial file, the decision was made between the Director of the institution and the deputy director.⁶⁹ None of the contemporary art conservators had been consulted. With this new agreement, *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* became a *unicum* artwork with an artist’s proof.⁷⁰ Eventually, the artist could sell his artist’s proof to an institution, which means that the National Gallery of Canada is no longer the sole distributor of the work.

It is relevant to mention that Théberge was the curator who first invited Massey to expose the work in Berlin in 1982. The history linking John Massey and Pierre Théberge turned out to be most influential, and Théberge is a mediator of importance in the life cycle of the work, first as the person who invited the artist to exhibit the artwork and thus allowing it to come into existence, and more than twenty years later, as the authority figure who gave his approval to turn this non-editioned artwork into an editioned one. Théberge influenced crucial phases in the life cycle of this artwork. Nowadays, *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* can be shown in two different locations at the same time, having been transformed from a unique piece into an editioned artwork.

Since the artist owns an artist’s proof, it is the artist’s proof that has been lent to institutions rather than the edition owned by the National Gallery of Canada. The instructions on how to display the work are now provided by the gallery representing the artist, Georgia Scherman Projects.⁷¹ The fact that the artist’s proof circulates more than the edition owned by the National Gallery of Canada gives the artist greater control over how the work will be exhibited. So far, the display has been consistent since 2000 (Fig. 5.6 and 5.7). Nevertheless, since the artist owns an artist’s proof, he could eventually decide to change its display. The scripting of the life cycle of the work so far, however, has not shown that the edition owned by the artist and the edition owned by the National Gallery of Canada have been exhibited

⁶⁹ The email of the deputy director, David Franklin to the artist is dated on March 30, 2006. See curatorial files, National Gallery of Canada. [File consulted on 25 July 2007.]

⁷⁰ *Unicum* comes from Latin and means unique. In this case, the work was sold as an edition of one (1/1), and later an artist proof (AP) was released on the market. To this day, Massey has not sold his artist’s proof to an institution.

⁷¹ See the website of the gallery, accessed July 4, 2011, <http://www.georgiascherman.com/>.

differently. They have not encountered variations like the editions of Douglas Gordon's *Play Dead; Real Time* discussed in Chapter Three. This consistency in the manifestations of the work reinforces the hypothesis that *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* has now reached a stable format, and will remain stable at least until the technology fails again.

Despite the fact that there are now two editions of the work circulating in the art world, these two editions have differences. In terms of the work history, I would argue that the edition owned by the National Gallery of Canada is the only *integral* and *complete* one since the original support on which the artwork was produced – 16 mm film – is no longer in the hands of the artist. Even the masters of the video version of the work produced in 1993, on Betacam format, are only owned by the National Gallery of Canada. As a matter of fact, the artist's proof of *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* can only be sold as a video installation. Whereas the edition owned by the National Gallery of Canada has known different states: the inaugural version, the video version and the cinematic version, the artist's proof has only known one state: the digital version. If the artist were to sell it, the acquiring institution or collector would miss out on the history of the work, on the various manners it has been displayed in the exhibition space. It is only in the curatorial and conservation files of the National Gallery of Canada that the most complete documentation on the life cycle of *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* can be found. One could argue that this does not matter, since the only version currently shown is the digital version, but nevertheless, the *de-scription* done throughout this chapter has pointed out how determinant the different versions of the work have been in shaping its identity.

5.4 Conclusion

The scripting of the life cycle of *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* done throughout the chapter with the methodological tool of *de-scription* has shown that in 1982, only its conceptual state was achieved. It was later, in 1993, that a functional state was attained and even later, after the year 2000, that it found a stable presentation format. The *de-scription* has also helped identify three different versions of the work: the filmic version, the video version, and the digital version. These different versions of *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* make it a work, as Gérard Genette would call it, of plural immanences because the title can refer to two things at once, i.e., a film installation and a video installation.

In the previous case study chapters, the changes that occurred after the artworks' inaugural exhibitions were mainly studied from the presentation perspective (Chapter Three) and from the distribution perspective (Chapter Four). In this chapter, it is the preservation perspective that was the focus. Among the major events that occurred in the life cycle of *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* were its migrations. The preservation process of this work is a great illustration of the approach defended by the Variable Media Network, *permanence through change*, where preserving the concept of the work is emphasized. This process might involve changes in the materiality and the physical appearances of the work, but the aim is to extend the life cycle of variable media artworks. In the case of *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)*, one could even argue that the inaugural version of this artwork was a prototype. Different mediators had to be involved in order to help the artist give a functional physical manifestation to an idea he had in the early 1980s. This speaks to the relevance of using *scripting* as a theoretical framework, as it helps identify the role of each mediator in the life cycle of an artwork and understand how the work was back then and how it has evolved into what it is today.

The *de-description* of the life cycle of *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* has made visible the mediators involved in the making of this work and the shaping of its identity. In the first part of the chapter, which dealt with the making of the work and its inaugural exhibitions, it was shown that good acoustics and an intimate exhibition space improved the viewing experience of the visitors. Also discussed was the fact that the medium chosen to make the work failed to do justice to the concept the artist had intended to put forth. In addition, it showed that the reviews of the inaugural exhibitions played a double role: they indicated how the work had been interpreted, and they were also sources of information that led to the identification of other mediators. In the scripting process, both their roles could be discerned. In the second part of the chapter, which focused on the phase of the life cycle of the work during which a suitable exhibition format was chosen, the role of new mediators was discussed. Since the National Gallery of Canada acquired the work, a transfer of responsibilities took place and it is the institution that then has the duty of exhibiting and preserving the artwork. Nevertheless, it was a curator from another institution, interested in exhibiting *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* who triggered the preservation process of this work and who suggested the migration solution. In the third section of the chapter, which dealt with the plural immanences of the artwork, it was shown that the notion of editions is not just a product of the art market system, but also, if understood in a broader way, of a preservation process, as the work has been through different versions (filmic

version, video version, digital version). Finally, the *de-scription* of the different phases of *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* has shown how its socialization evolved since 1982.