

# The Book of George: The Life and Art of George Sawchuk

COMOX VALLEY ART GALLERY - CONTEMPORARY GALLERY - JUNE 28 TO AUGUST 9, 2014

GUEST CURATOR: GRANT SHILLING



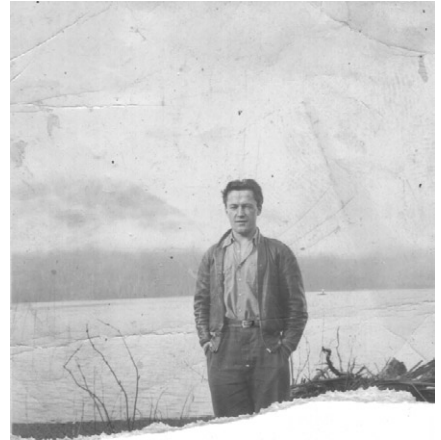




# Biography

George Sawchuk  
1927 - 2012

George Sawchuk was born in 1927 or 1929 in Kenora, Ontario, one of three sons of a Polish mother and Russian father. Although he rejected formal education at the age of thirteen to begin a thirty-eight year career as an itinerant laborer, his early education left an indelible mark throughout his training at the traditional Roman Catholic school, he also attended, for two hours daily and on Saturday day mornings, lessons in the Russian language and "World Politics" sponsored by the local Bolshevik or Labour Hall.



These polarized ideologies remained the dominant touchstones in his intellectual development as Sawchuk pursued a self-educated course to determine a philosophy of personal and social



integrity. More than imbuing Sawchuk with a complex ethical and political consciousness, the unlikely amalgam of opposing systems gave him a propensity toward a consistent belief structure. The two extremist positions formed a dialectic which has been the basis of his thoughts and behaviour ever since. His conscious quest for a congruous approach was fortified by his self-disciplinarian habits, born from the necessity to survive and a stubborn nature. Sawchuk conscientiously studied Marx in a remote logging camp, and his curiosity once kept him on board a ship for months to continue a dialogue with a retired University of Toronto history professor. This existential existence was constantly tempered by the hard realities of a working-class life and by his daily encounters with nature. He also developed a series of manual skills and honed his social ideas within a tradition of trade unionism. Inadvertently, and without preparation he was preparing himself for the career of an artist. ([www.georgesawchuk.org](http://www.georgesawchuk.org))

(All photos on opposite page by Ron Pogue)



## About The Exhibition

George Sawchuk passed away in February of 2012. *The Book of George: The Life and Art of George Sawchuk* is the first opportunity to examine and expand upon the legacy of the Fanny Bay based artist since he died. The title of the show reflects George's trademark of placing simple wooden books he fashioned together with brass hinges, filled with hand written aphorisms and quotations and placed in the notches of trees. The exhibition will offer the first ever display of the George Sawchuk archives. The archives include documentation of George Sawchuk's early site specific works in North Vancouver by Iain Baxter (Order of Canada and founder of the N.E. Thing Co).

*"There is no need to consecrate the water for it already arrives that way"*

The opening reception featured water tasting – a central concern of George's work as well as his sugar cookies that he baked for the kids who would visit his Forest Gallery. This exhibition consists of two sites: here at CVAG and the Forest Gallery that surround the Fanny Bay home that George built and he and life partner Pat Helps shared for close to 40 years.



George Sawchuk with his wife Pat Helps

# The Book of George: The Life and Art of George Sawchuk

*Art is but an idea that sets things into motion, and it's that motion that creates reality.*

- George Sawchuk

In circular motions, George Sawchuk hand drills holes into trees near his home in the woods in North Vancouver. It is 1968. His work at Jameson Construction done for the day, George takes some hand tools, a brown stubby of beer or two, a notepad and carpenter's pencil, places them in a steel lunch pail and begins another, different shift here in the forest.

Sawchuk stops to peer through the hole to line it up with another hole he has drilled. He follows instructions that he has carefully sketched out onto an index card with the goal to put three steel pipes through three trees.



Tree drilling in North Vancouver. Photo: Iain Baxter circa 1968

When it is too dark to work he reluctantly packs up and bicycles home to Riverside Drive. He trudges up a set of stairs past another experiment: a set of three steel pipes he has set vertically into cement. George eats some grub and reads and writes late into the night. Sleep is something he has little need of.

Other days he places different objects into living trees: gauges, bicycle rims and faucets. Corrugated metal is wrapped around trees, rope threaded through others, a door knob is fastened to another tree. Faucets begin to appear on trees. The juxtapositions create meanings and beg more questions.

Sawchuk brings stumps and cedar and fir rounds to his yard. Objects are placed in or on the stumps: axes, shovels, pick axes, any number of discarded objects, shells and other natural elements. Crude doors with hinges are made from the stumps and objects are placed inside them. Sawchuk continues to work full time and after hours feverishly pursues this other, mysterious activity.

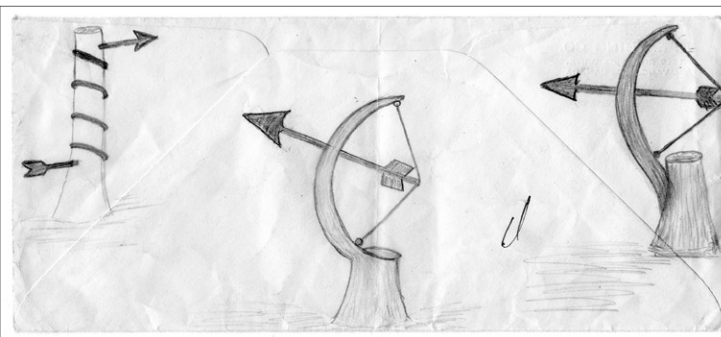
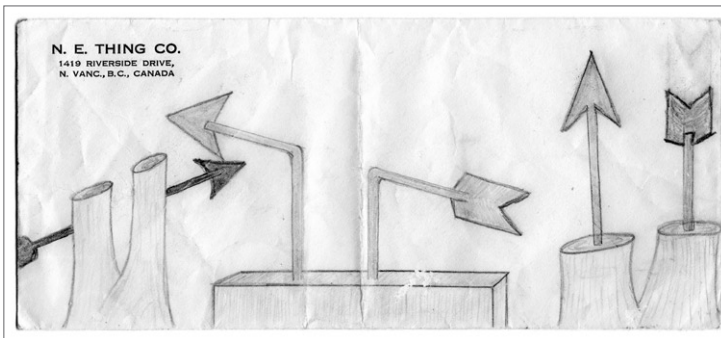
A lean-to is set up behind his and Pat Helps' house and the rounds are fashioned into plinths. Saw blades and mirrors are placed into them, painted rocks placed on them. Crosses and hammer and sickles appear.

An industrial accident results in Sawchuk's leg being "bucked off". Freed from a life of labour the 'real work' - as poet Gary Snyder refers to it – has begun.

Late one night George sits down to write:

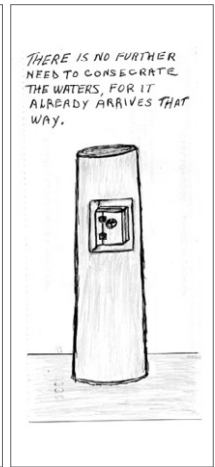
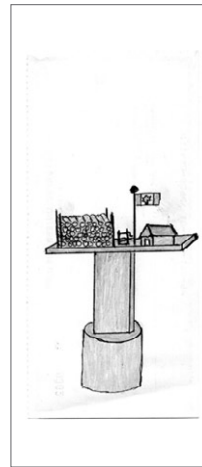
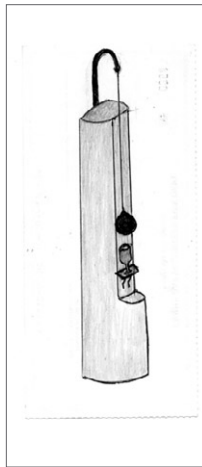
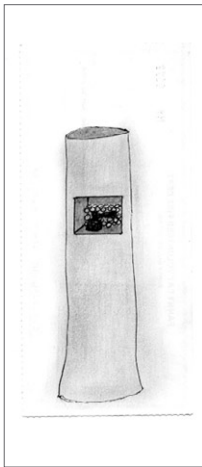
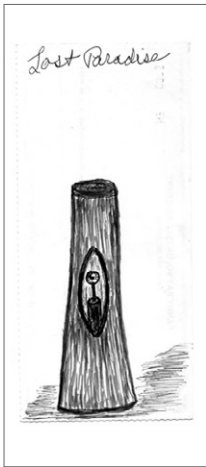
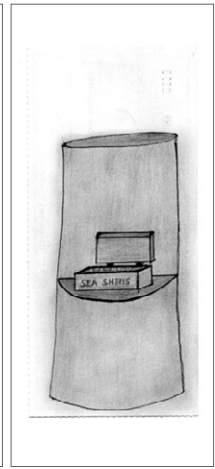
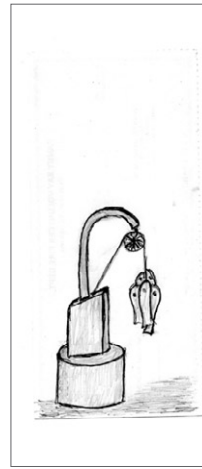
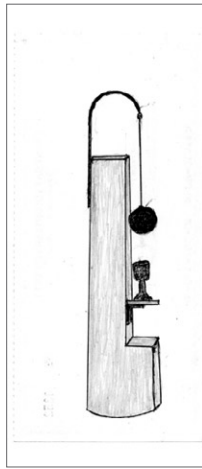
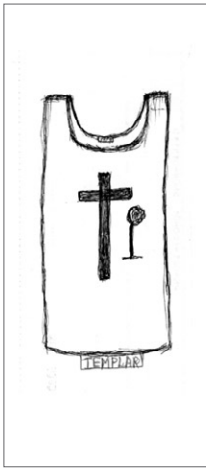
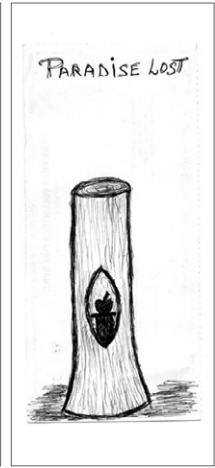
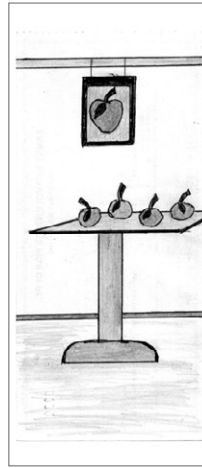
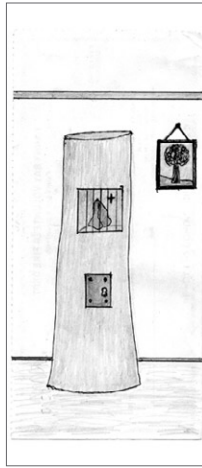
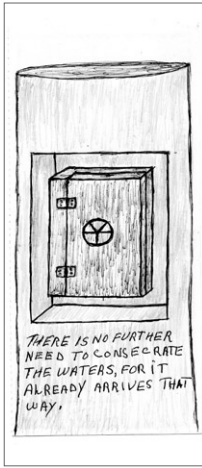
*I cannot speak for all, but it seems to me that there comes a time in every life when one must step out of the traces of commercialism and then, without too much preparation or direction be set loose. For me that time came early, unexpectedly and was not entirely of my own making. One of the very first things I realized in my new situation was that there is no invention that more greatly shrinks that physical and mental capabilities of the human being than the rocking chair; seated in one, I saw my world closing in on me. After 40 years of labour, I had compiled a great many resources that I could now draw upon, but they were all being evaporated. This I thought is not what life is all about; why live and experience a full life and allow it to be buried with you? How nice it would be if we all could leave a small part of ourselves behind.*

Soon after this statement of purpose George meets his North Vancouver neighbours, Iain and Ingrid Baxter, co-founders of the N.E. Thing Co. The Baxter's are involved in conceptual explorations of art that includes the practice of using photography to document idea-works and their sites. They begin to document Sawchuk's experiments and dialogue with him about his work. The Baxter's also make George aware that his work has precedents in the art world. They *opened a door in an invisible wall* as Sawchuk puts it. They help set things in motion.



Sawchuk's sketches  
on cheques from the  
Fanny Bay Volunteer  
Fire Department  
(opposite page)

Sawchuk's sketches  
on an envelope from  
the N.E. Thing Co.,  
co-founded by Iain  
and Ingrid Baxter







### Early Work 1966 - 1969:

George Sawchuk drills holes into a tree in the bush in North Vancouver for the purposes of inserting three metal rods into them.

The photo documentation is done by Iain and Ingrid Baxter, co-founders of the hugely influential art outfit N.E. Thing Co and Sawchuk's North Vancouver neighbours.

Photos: Iain and Ingrid Baxter

### Raw Materials:

George Sawchuk works to remove a downed cedar tree in the forest near his and Pat Help's Fanny Bay home. The tree will be used in his portable sculptures.







After his meeting with the Baxters, George has his first solo show at the UBC Art Gallery in 1970. The work is minimalist yet lyrical. In one piece a cedar log is laid on the floor of the gallery and cut into diagonal sections. There are several homages to workmates, in another work an axe is simply set tight in a stump.

With Sawchuk's work now in galleries he begins to create his 'portables'; museum oriented, refined pieces set on oiled wooden plinths or rounds sourced from the windfall around his woods. The portables, as critic Bruce Ferguson notes, did not alter Sawchuk's working procedures but it did allow the realization of a greater degree of complexity in the work and also to reflect more overt political concerns.

Two of those earlier, more political pieces, *1917* and *1935* (both produced in 1979), are included here in this exhibition. In the case of both pieces the dates are inscribed onto metal plates into the work and thus direct a certain amount of interpretation. The portable *1917* marks the date of the Russian Revolution and contains the hammer and sickle with a crucifix suspended from it. The two icons of communism and Christianity, the basis of George's brief childhood education, create a seamless harmony that is consistent with George's feeling that there were more similarities between the two belief systems than differences.

The portable *1935* speaks to the depth of the depression and George's painful memories of it. The copper in the piece came from the roof of the luxurious Hotel Vancouver built during the depression from the hands of labour that could never afford to stay there. Disparity is a central theme of George's work. George spoke of the times he was forced to steal a can or two of beans from a store in order to feed himself. He did not say this with pride but with a sense of the desperation that hunger brings.

*Grainary* (made in 1984) another portable in this exhibition is explained in a handwritten note by George: *"The wheat represents the west, the rice the east, my philosophy on food is that it should not ever be monopolized, food belongs to everyone. Often as not, what separates hunger and more hunger is a quarter-inch thick piece of glass, the message here tends to be an interplay of civil disobedience."* The piece was made during the Ethiopian famine crisis and reflects George's immersion in international concerns which were informed by his ritual readings of *The New Internationalist* magazine, *The Guardian* newspaper any number of books as well as listening to the CBC radio.

Two pieces - one in the Forest Gallery of a black glove with a red ball, another a museum portable titled *Robben Island* (2004) - reflects his concerns with Nelson Mandela and the apartheid system. The red ball a symbol of communism which the ANC, Mandela's party, was associated with. The rock incorporated into the *Robben Island* piece is another example of a cross-pollinating of ideas between the portables and the forest. George painted rocks he said because colour is important but the rock itself represents knowledge held by time.



In the portable *Books and Stone* (1991) George places on a table top plinth three of his wooden books held shut by a bolt, juxtaposed with a stone. The books are not to be cracked open, inert like a stone but storing vast knowledge.

George's deep interest and faith in books began with his early education in both the bible and Das Kapital. It wasn't Catholicism or communism where he placed his faith but books that reflected not only those ideas, but an entire forest of knowledge.

Literary critic and theorist Northrop Frye in *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* wrote that all sacred texts have the concentration of poetry. The power of the word for George found its home in trees. This is consistent with the Germanic folkloric tradition wherein dryads are thought to live in trees, and can be invoked for protection. The bush would always be shelter, sanctuary, source of employment and artistic ferment for George.

On exhibit here are some of the extensive notes George wrote reflecting his thoughts on everything from art to current events. He'd write and rewrite a thought down until satisfied and sign off with "George Sawchuk of Fanny Bay."

He also drew sketches of his portables reflecting the deep amount of thought that went into their execution. On display at this exhibition are dozens of sketches of his portables on the back of unused Fanny Bay Volunteer Fire Department cheques. The approach reflects the unassuming nature of the man. George would continue to sketch until the last days of his life.

In this exhibit are George's most recent works made from mill ends. George worked on these series of pieces for the last few years of his life. Included in this exhibit are an homage to Rene Magritte complete with umbrella and another piece using gauges labelled hydrogen and oxygen, reflecting George's ongoing concern about water.

The role of art, Sawchuk once explained, is to create another language. *"In the early days lots of people were illiterate and the King or whomever posted a sign for the people – they couldn't read or write so it was up to the artists to draw them a picture. Now when I say in the old days, when the people couldn't read or write, it doesn't mean that they were stupid – the thing is today most people can read or write yet they are still ignorant to the facts, so we still have to keep drawing pictures for them."*

The poetry, lyricism and understanding of his materials, the labour to secure them and the life lived fill Sawchuk's work out. *"He was not an artist in search of content,"* renowned Vancouver artist Alan Wood once commented. *"His life provided the materials."*

After selling some art work early in his career, something George felt terribly unsatisfying and troubling, he refused to sell his work in his lifetime, preferring to wait for others to do that after

he was gone. George's ambivalence about the art world – it's mechanisms of commerce and co-mingling – may have resulted in less recognition in his lifetime. Vancouver artist and curator Roy Arden wrote: *"Reticence can become an effective strategy for coping, for preserving what is important."* Or as George put it: *"I'll sell you my back for two bucks an hour mister, but I'll keep my mind to myself. I don't prostitute my mind."*

*"He [was] not part of the regular artistic economy,"* says Ian Thom, senior curator of the Vancouver Art Gallery. *"So as a consequence, he's not as well known as he should be. One of the wonderful things about him [was] that he [did] the work for himself and the people who enjoyed it, and if he never had another exhibition in his life, he'd [have] not [been] unhappy."*

In one of his notes George has simply written *"Joesph Beuys, German Artist."* Perhaps it is a reference to an artist that George wanted to learn more about, but it is a necessary thread that curator Annette Hurtig discusses in an essay on Sawchuk. In reference to the Forest Gallery, Hurtig writes *"Free of the constraints imposed by gallery exhibition, Sawchuk's yard work, like much of Joseph Beuys' endeavour, is a manifesto, a declaration, and a realization of other epistemologies that are cognizant of the effects of signs, symbols and the covert and overt influences whereby humanity alternates between power and impotence, delusion and rational pragmatism, creativity and entropy, in a miasma of our own making – and cognizant as well of natural processes, growth, decline, equilibrium, constant change."*

In 2006 fierce winter storms hit Vancouver Island. Centuries-old trees were uprooted, and many of them damaged George's work or blocked paths, making them inaccessible. Mother nature had come to reclaim his art. George was fine with the change, he felt it part of the cycle of his work. *"Everything must change,"* he said at the time in reference to his decision to leave his work to return to the earth.



George felt that the Forest Gallery should be viewed as a whole. *"It's not about understanding each individual sculpture,"* he says. *"It's the feeling you get from walking through the forest, the whole thing together."*

Visitors to the Forest Gallery were as welcome as they would let themselves feel. The unsuspecting would soon come upon Pat and George's house and notions of public and private came into play.



If George was there he would wave them in, down tools and with Pat as the perfect host, serve up a drink and a bite to eat, reflecting his desire for conversation and checking in with the world, face-to-face. George also baked three dozen sugar cookies a week for the kids who would come to visit him and Pat in the woods. What life had taught him was not just how to make objects but more importantly how to make friends.

On the cover of George's wooden books is a symbol carved and burnished into the wood. George put it there because: *"People thought we had some kind of cult here in the woods,"* he chuckles, *"So I put that symbol there."*

Every day George Sawchuk wrote the book.

- Grant Shilling



## ADDITIONAL SOURCES:

Arden, Roy. Supernatural, Contemporary Art Gallery, 2004

Ferguson, Bruce. George Sawchuk: A Natural Politic, Mendel Art Gallery, 1980

Harris, George. Rough Hewn: the Art of George Sawchuk, March 11-May 6 2004

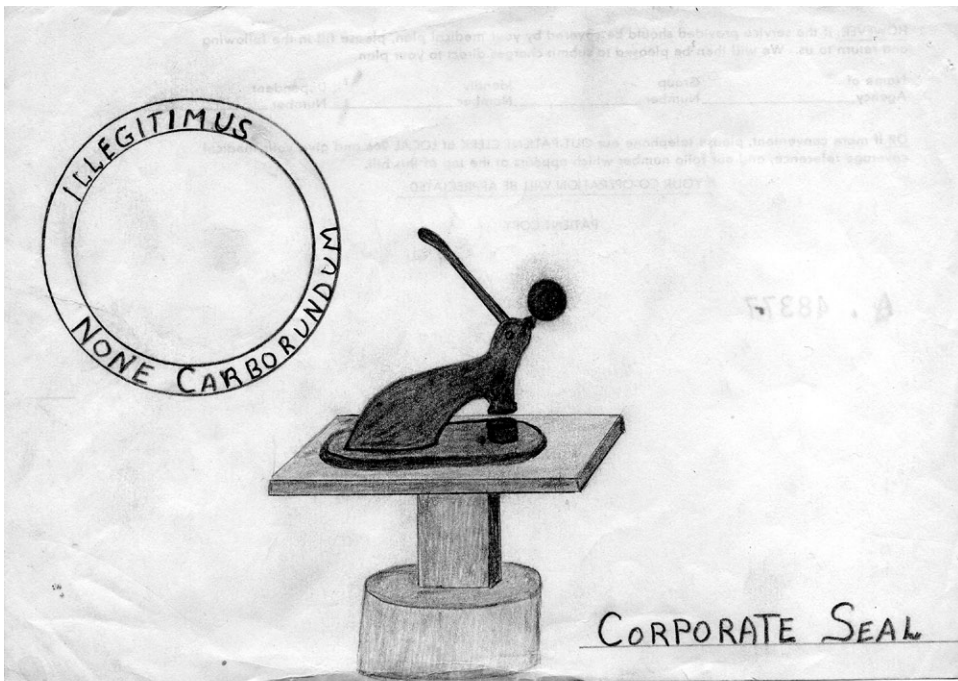
Hurtig, Annette. Sawchuk: Yard Work. Western Front, 1988

Wiseman, Les. Outsider Art. The Georgia Straight, May 22-29, 1997

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

Thanks to Mary Alice, Shawn Pigott, Ron Pogue, Matt Rader, Megan Wilson, Jeff Hartbower, Pete Zolner, The School of Fine Art and Design with the support of the NIC Foundation and the Comox Valley Art Gallery.

Most especially to Pat Helps, thank you Pat for always making yourself available to me and for entrusting me with George's archives and work.





# The Book of George: The Life and Art of George Sawchuk

CVAG CONTEMPORARY GALLERY, JUNE 28 to AUGUST 9, 2014

**Installation Residency:** June 17 to 26

Guest Curator Grant Shilling will be on site from noon to 2pm Tuesdays thru Saturdays. The public is welcome to drop by and view the work as it's being installed.

**Opening Reception:** Friday June 27

6pm make art project + water tasting + sugar cookies

7pm opening remarks

**Canada Day Potluck + Readings:** July 1 from 2pm onwards

At George's & Pat's home (372 Bates Drive, Fanny Bay, BC)

With authors Terry Glavin and Elizabeth Bachinsky

**Curator Talk:** July 12 at 1pm with Grant Shilling

**Readings at CVAG:** July 15, 7pm

Author Lee Henderson and author/carver Chris Arnett



## Exhibition Contributors:

Mary Alice, video

Iain & Ingrid Baxter, archival photography

Kempton Dexter, music

George Harris, photography

Shawn Pigott, video

Ron Pogue, photography

Matt Rader, reading series

## Exhibit Sponsors:

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and District Labour Council

Mayworks Vancouver Island

## For Further Inquires:

Grant Shilling at [grant@cedarsurf.com](mailto:grant@cedarsurf.com)

# CVAG comoxvalleyartgallery.com

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