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## EDITORIAL

CRUX, as in a vital, basic, decisive, or pivotal point.

CRUX, as in a cross, an intersection.

CRUX, as in something that torments by its puzzling nature; a perplexing difficulty. A puzzle, a problem.

This month's theme – CRUX – also a sexy word for “essence” is a concept that has preoccupied the minds of philosophers for all time. Of feminists, too. And of feminist philosophers, especially.

But I have no handle on the concept, personally. I won't even attempt to untangle the idea of crux: crux is after all “a puzzling or apparently insoluble problem”. I don't think I've ever used the word in conversation, and not even in a paper for school where goodness knows mystery words appear from time to time. So why crux, you ask? Well, because it can easily turn into a good pick-up line. Especially during Hallowe'en. Ask anyone “What are you supposed to be?” (or try “What's at your crux”?) and you'll see.

No, don't.

My theory - if you permit me a quick but serious intervention here - is that we're a mess when it comes to figuring out life's little cruxes. I'm amazed that crux can even have a plural form, really. More options, more loopholes, more theories, more interpretations. All we can do is attempt to figure ourselves out, until identity itself gets boring... if it ever does.

Jim Verburg attempts to solve the hardest personal crux of all, possibly. In his photographic

exploration of the relationship, Verburg negotiates the place of the camera--light and colour--within and into intimacy. He writes “well, after falling in love with light, I think I fell in love with love. All I wanted to do was photograph the people in my life, specifically men that I dated.”

Crux is also the attribute or set of attributes that make an object what it fundamentally is, and which it has by necessity, and without which it loses its identity.

En français, “crux” c'est une idée forcée, un centre, un fond, un passage clé, un nœud, le cœur, le noyau, la fondamentale, l'essentiel...

Nous avons deux pièces sonores : une de Myléna Bergeron (Baby Piano. Made in China.) et l'autre de Magali Babin (Wood u hear me). Belle coïncidence, les deux artistes ont le bois au coeur de leur création...

Crux is also defined as a vital or decisive stage. Crux as the basic, central, or critical point or feature: the crux of the matter; the crux of an argument. Enter Karen Herland and Susan G. Cole, Speaking truth and power. In this article, Herland highlights the changing nature of the crux; she shows the importance of being resolute in our politics and the importance of evolving ideas. Cole's adamancy that “two things can be true at the same time” certainly provokes—the conversation is ongoing. Join in on the conversation, dear reader, this is what this is for.

If we think of the crux as the central or essential part around which other parts are gathered or grouped then it becomes a good organizing principle. The importance of returning to our activist roots, mentioned in Herland's piece (and Chamberland's in NMP no.1!) resonates in Liz Millward's text as well: “the story of les-

bians organizing in 1970s Canada is one filled with adventure.”

Jon Davies suggests that “It has become a truism that the collective General Idea has taken its place among the most influential of Canadian artists.” Their relevance today, Davies suggest, is in their complexity - the complexity of interpreting their work.

Crux. It’s also a rare word for “cross”. Cross to bear? That’s the heavy burden of responsibility one, alone, must cope with.

Should Ottawa have a safe injection site? This is what NMP regular contributor Nicholas Little asks. While Vancouver is currently the only city in Canada with a safe injection site, Little compares and contrasts the lack of safe spaces for drug users to the spaces for the consumption of a more common drug – alcohol. Little, highlights the hypocrisy, if not glaring class divide, around the ways in which consuming drugs gets defined and the impacts of criminalizing drug use.

You’ll hear the bombs drop as you read Vanessa Kwan & NMP’s article-interview See Girl has got to have it: Diyan Achjadi and the Military Complex: it “explodes with candy-coated colour and childhood imagery”... Diyan Achjadi’s video work is a welcome addition to NMP’s Dayna McLeod’s bimonthly curated series, showcasing an array of provocative and compelling works by video artists across the country.

Renuka Chaturvedi reviews Zoe Whittall’s second novel, *Holding Still for as Long as Possible* and interviews the acclaimed author.

Elisha would like you all to know that her “previous NMP comic strip *100 Butches* has been bought by Alyson Books New York, who publish

seminal work like *Heather Has Two Mommies* and a lot of gay smut. *100 Butches Volume 1* will come out in April 2010, and she’s thrilled to bits to be touring with Michelle Tea on her annual American reading tour *Sister Spit*.” NMP is also thrilled about this for Elisha and we say CONGRATS!!

Her new strip, *The Illustrated Gentleman*, is an illustrated series of dandies, butches, fags and any queers obsessed with men’s clothes. It is a work in progress and she would love to hear new suggestions for the subtitles or layout.

Special thanks to copy editors for this issue: Renuka Chaturvedi, the mysterious TS, Andrea Zeffiro, Lindsay Shane, and Jenn Clamen.

Le prochain numéro - WOUND - sortira le 1er janvier, 2010 !

As always, do comment on the articles (yes, contributors will always love your input) and dear readers, we are still and always committed to bringing forward an unruly and exciting magazine bimonthly.

*Mél Hogan*



## **NEGOTIATING INTIMACY WITH JIM VERBURG**

*Jim Verburg | NMP*

Capturing fleeting moments, ephemeral glimpses and cinematic memories, Jim Verburg uses light colour, intimacy and sexuality to show us a tender side of relationships in his photographic work. NMP had a chance to talk with Jim about his process and practice.

### **NMP: When did you first pick up a camera?**

JV: I can't remember when I actually picked up a camera, although I always wanted one of my own. The summer I was fourteen, my dad let me use the family point and shoot during summer camp, and I took a lot of photos of morning light, mist and canoes. Later that year, I set up a little one-day studio in the family rec. room. I draped a sheet under a row of spotlights, and had my sister sit on a backward facing chair and laugh with her hands in the air. I guess I wanted to capture what I saw in fashion magazines. I asked for an SLR (single-lens reflex camera) every Christmas, but didn't get one. There was actually a year that everyone in the family got a camera for Christmas except me, but that's another interview... I eventually got a hand-me-down SLR and started taking lots of photos.

### **NMP: How does intimacy factor into your work?**

JV: I've always found that there is such a shift to what you're experiencing when you look through an SLR camera, the framing and focusing of what you're seeing surrounded by black; there is something quiet and intimate about the experience. It allows you to meditate, to focus on an aspect of what you're experiencing. The camera is kind of like a small personal cinema where the photographer is both the director and the audience. I have always loved this experience. Do you remember the View-Master? The viewing device with the paper discs



of images that you clicked through? When you were peering into it, it was the only thing that existed- a mini, dark, personal, theatre with clear bright images.

I remember being disappointed when the photos [of my sister] were developed. They weren't as magical as when I was peering through the lens. Maybe that's why I moved to work with the projected image- to get back that brightness in a dark space.

**NMP: How has your practice evolved, and how has your approach changed?**

JV: Well, after falling in love with light, I think I fell in love with love. All I wanted to do was photograph the people in my life, specifically men that I dated. Looking back on it, I think it was a way to make sense of what I was feeling and in a way, creating what the relationship was through photography. I saw it a certain way, and I wanted to hold on to the way I was seeing it. I guess I wanted to capture the beauty of what I was experiencing. It's interesting actually- when I entered into a long term, more permanent relationship, I didn't feel the desire or need to photograph it. I wanted to live the

relationship rather than interpret or portray it a certain way.

In the beginning, portraiture was always tied to my love or attraction to the person. People say that all portraiture is self-portraiture, and I guess the images at the beginning of my career was very much about how I was seeing my relationships. Through the encouragement of a professor at Concordia, I started to explore portraiture of people I didn't really know or wasn't intimate with. The photographs are very different, as is the approach, and it becomes more about composition, light and aesthetic beauty.

**NMP: Is your sex life and your photographic life intertwined, and if so, how do you approach your subjects/partners? What is their response to "the process" and what are their reactions to the work?**

JV: I find most of my work more intimate than overtly sexual. That being said, I don't want to down play sexuality in my work. I've always wanted to present sexuality as a multi-layered and normal aspect of life and relationships, rather than as one-dimensional, overly stylized sexy images [as they] might portray in porn





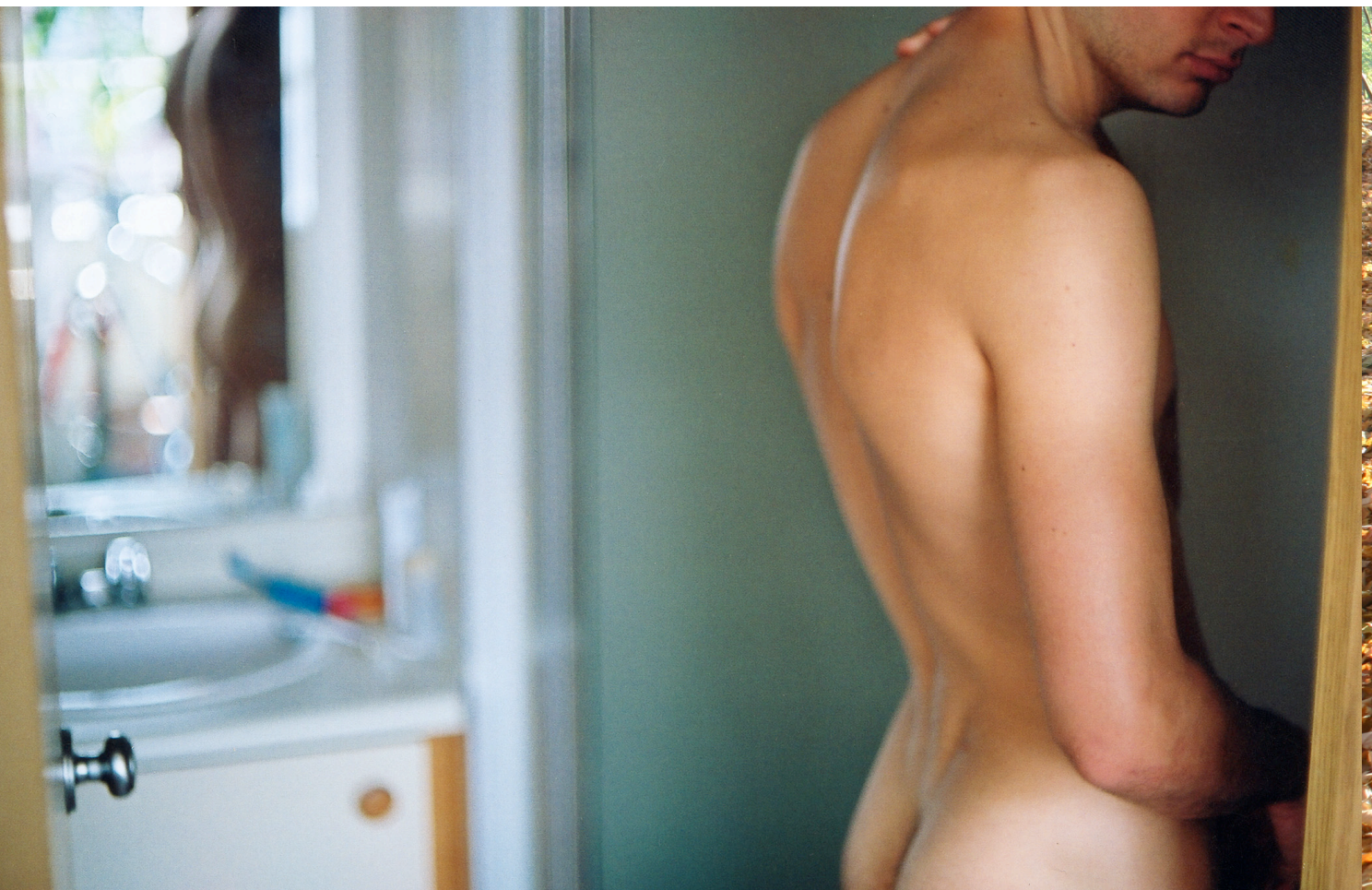
or fashion. Don't get me wrong- I love images that portray sex or beauty, it just hasn't been my primary concern. There's no formula. Every interaction is different, whether it's with someone I'm intimate with or someone I hardly know. Often, with someone I'm intimate with, the camera is around when we're hanging out, and there are hardly ever planned shoots. I'm usually inspired by how the light falls somewhere, or I'm just struck by how beautiful someone looks in the moment. "Hold on, I just want to get my camera," is how it often happens. For people I don't know, it's more of a planned photo shoot, and the model just shows me what they want to show me.

**NMP: Can you talk about your film and writing practice as well as your installation work? How do you decide what form a project takes?**

JV: People have often commented that my photographic work looked very "filmic". Years ago, when I was living in Kingston Ontario, a film student saw a little exhibit of my work at the local cafe, and thought that I would be a natural at film making. He gave me to reels of 16mm film (I think about 10 minutes worth) and asked me

to make a film about whatever I wanted while he made a video about the process. It was a fun experience thinking about how I might translate a photo project into film. The result of our collaboration played at a few festivals, but it's a bit cringe worthy when I look at it now. There are a few great ideas, but also some pretty bad ones. I didn't make any film or video until 5 years later for a class at Concordia.

That piece was made entirely of still images; I thought that it would be a good way to make the jump from still to moving images. It's the only form of film and video that I've done since (using still images). I think in the past I would be inspired by something I saw; now I feel like I'm inspired by something I think or feel. I write it down, and then think of the best way to portray the idea or emotion. To be honest, I found working with one photograph or a series of photographs to be a bit limiting. It's a great challenge to convey all you want to convey in one image. When you're working with moving images, you can play with pacing, the juxtaposition of images and sound. Sound can add so much. Especially when the work is about intimacy or about personal stories. A voice can be a very powerful tool.







**NMP: Do you think your practice is moving more towards film and video?**

JV: I'm not sure. I think it's a really great way to get an idea out. Film festivals are a great venue for an audience to see what you do. It really does depend on the project. I'm currently working on a series of short films that deal with hidden personal stories based on recorded interviews. I'm also working on a series of individual portrait books and an unresolved text piece. So yeah- it all depends on the idea. Someone asked me if I was a photographer and

I found it a difficult question to answer. I think my practice is based in photography but has moved to other media. As much as I love light, colour and form, my main concern is to portray emotional matters in a way that doesn't manipulate people into feeling what I want them to feel, that issues about family and relationships can be expressed in ways that normalizes the experience. I recently had a meeting with a curator from Finland. When she had finished watching "For a Relationship," she looked at me and said, "there is so much I want to tell my mother but can't..." which started a great



discussion about the complexities of family relationships. I felt really good after our conversation. It was exactly what I hoped my work would do. By telling personal stories in a certain way, other people can connect with their own stories, histories and the way they feel about their relationships.

*Jim Verburg was born in Belleville, Ontario, and has lived in Vancouver, Kingston, Ontario, and currently lives and works in Montreal. His work has been exhibited, screened and published nationally and internationally.*

*His second film For a Relationship screened at the 2008 Oberhausen Short Film Festival in Germany, and won the 2008 Jury Prize for the "Best Canadian Short Film" at the Inside Out Film Festival in Toronto. The work has also recently been nominated for the Iris Prize in the UK. He's held residencies at the National Film Board of Canada (NFB) and Gallery 44 in Toronto. In spring 2009, he had a solo exhibition at Widmer and Theodoridis Contemporary Gallery in Zurich, and was featured by the gallery at the HOT ART Fair 2009 in Basel Switzerland. <http://www.jim-verburg.com>*



## **PIÈCE : WOOD U HEAR ME**

*Magali Babin*

*[Présentation de la pièce]*

*[Titre] Wood u hear me 2'40*

### Essence et sens

Les sens du son, des bruits qui nous entourent, des choses qui font partie de notre quotidien. Les sons qui nous reposent, qui nous agressent et ceux que l'on n'entend plus. Le son d'un sens, entendre une caresse sur la peau, entendre le vent du feu, écouter le mouvement sous l'eau de ce qu'on ne peut voir.

Crépitements, grincements, craquements. L'essence d'une matière, le son de sa texture.

Wood u hear me est un assemblage sonore ayant pour sujet le son du bois. Le bois qui brûle dans un foyer, le son sous l'eau d'un quai qui grince, et le son des branches qui craquent lors d'une balade en forêt, là où le silence est le plus près.

*Magali Babin triture les bruits, le son, le son des bruits et performe, compose, improvise avec eux. Elle le fait avec quelques outils numériques, mais surtout avec des objets banals, des micros contacts, des tables tournantes, ainsi qu'avec l'environnement qui l'entoure. Elle se commet seule, en trio (mineminemine), en quatuor (Quatuor de tables tournantes de Martin Tétreault) ou en géographie variable (nocinéma.org). Magali Babin médite très sérieusement et le plus souvent possible sur « La géographie sonore des objets », « L'espace d'un son et le son dans l'espace », « Les interférences entre microcosme et macrocosme sonores », « Pour une pédagogie de l'art bruitiste » et « Le silence inexistant ». On a pu entendre son travail ici et là : Mutek, Rien à voir, Suonidelpopolo (Montréal), MoisMulti (Québec), Transmédiales (Berlin), High Zero (É.-U.), New-MusicFestival (Vancouver), Root Festival (Angleterre).*

<http://nomorepotlucks.org/article/crux-no6/pi%C3%A8ce-wood-u-hear-me>

## **SPEAKING TRUTH AND POWER**

*Karen Herland | Susan G. Cole*

The 1980s represent a particular moment in feminist politics. Without a lengthy, easily contested, necessarily subjective attempt to synthesize the final years of second wave feminism, some things bear repeating in this context. That decade encompasses the bitterness of the feminist porn wars and a virulent mainstream backlash against feminist politics. It may be simplistic, but also useful, to suggest that the emphasis placed on identifying and responding to violence against women was a feminist strategy to underscore the urgency of a radical reconceptualization of gender roles and power.

Susan G. Cole and I had a fair bit in common the first time I interviewed her 24 years ago. Cole came to Montreal touring the anti-pornography position in a debate with Varda Burstyn, who had recently published the anthology *Women Against Censorship*. I was an active member of Concordia's women's collective, as a loud student journalist. Cole was even louder. She had been a member of Toronto's first lesbian organization in the 70s and was writing for *Broadside: A Feminist Review*. I was frankly awestruck by Cole (rereading the interview I wrote then is embarrassing in the way that encountering your own supposedly clever, but transparently not, youthful self can be). I think I recognized in Cole a shared commitment to articulate (often very unpopular) opinions and challenge cherished assumptions.

Cole and I both became politicized during a period in the women's movement when lesbianism was seen as essential to feminism, though she had to struggle with the suggestion that it was also detrimental to its progress; an argument I was spared a decade later. That moment in feminism proclaimed, 'porn is the theory and rape is the practice'. We responded to that challenge in remarkably different ways.



Cole has been a spokesperson for anti-pornography feminism for nearly three decades. Although I did participate in several Take Back the Night marches, I remember very clearly the year I was struck by how ridiculous it was to take back a single night in one lane along a designated route with police protection. My friends and I heckled the marchers and left, and I never went back. So I missed the later years when the route passed strip clubs where the marchers would shame the customers and deprive the women working inside of an evening's income. Fifteen years ago, I became the first coordinator for Stella, a community development program in Montreal for sex workers working as women.

Flash forward to 2008, when I'm teaching a course at Concordia's Simone de Beauvoir Institute that seeks to unpack how the social construction of the figure of the prostitute transmitted through medical, social, cultural, criminal, legal and popular institutions and filters serves to marginalize and silence sex workers. A student mentioned Cole in the context of a CBC radio interview she'd heard. In class, I played the debate between Cole – who is Entertainment editor at Now magazine and continues to comment on gender, sexuality and pop culture – and syndicated sex columnist Sasha. Their discussion addressed the online campaign that a women's studies graduate (using the name Natalie Dylan) had launched to auction off her virginity. The bids, then in the millions, were intended to finance her post-graduate studies. (According to Wikipedia, the multi-million dollar bidder eventually backed out, due to his wife's "dissatisfaction".)

I was struck by how much I disagreed with what Cole was saying. I was also curious about how we had started out with a similar impulse to challenge traditional notions of gender and

sexuality, likely been exposed to the same books and arguments, been kidded, cajoled, dismissed and ignored by many of the same people and institutions, and yet had moved in such different directions.

In planning how to organize this interview, it seemed extremely unproductive to recreate the porn debates decades later. I was more interested in tracing Cole's political path. I had hoped for a face-to-face conversation, but had to settle for a couple of phone conversations and a handful of email exchanges over about a month.

What follows is a capsule of, and reflection on, some of the turns and twists our discussion took, with digressions and interruptions edited for clarity. I tried to maintain context and tone despite these edits. Although our voices may not always be adequately captured, I hope the meaning is.

**KH: Your bio refers to you as an author and an activist. The activist part has been true for almost three decades, a really long time for that kind of position. What is it that drew you in to that public role?**

SGC: What I remember was that I was first involved in Women Against Violence Against Women in 1977.... I was the person that did all the media, like during the snuff demonstrations in Toronto[1] I remember I was doing an anti-pornography panel on City TV and the host outed me. It was 1980 and the host said that the reason I was so opposed to pornography was because it depicted men and women and I was a lesbian. ...

My feminism took me to lesbianism. My political values and ethics took me to this place. It's really different than the American position.

They say ‘we were born that way, there’s nothing I can do, about it, you have to tolerate me.’ I hate ‘tolerance’. My politics are not about tolerance — they are about inclusion and diversity.

[Back then] This producer at CTV called me to speak about lesbian issues and I decided not to. I said I was not ready for that yet, I was not that out. But after I got off the phone I thought, ‘I’m not that out but a CTV producer knows to call me’. So there are lots of levels of out. I was already out to my family then. That kind of public exposure is the last step that we take. I was also aware of the relationship between feminism and lesbianism. I didn’t want to be seen as a liability for feminism.

**KH: So there were ways that feminism and lesbianism connected in the 70s and 80s, and ways that they were seen as distinct. Your initial activism was around violence against women. Was that a particular focus at the time?**

SGC: Violence was what most women were responding to. They were naming things and giving it a language. Now politics are more linked to identity and all our politics have changed dramatically...I’m really interested in fluidity of gender. The early days of gay liberation, in the Body Politic (precursor to the Xtra magazine franchise)[2], we were actively working to eliminate sex roles, to move away from the gender dyad. This is much more interesting to me now. Then, if someone called me sir, I’d given them the full-on rant “what’s the matter with you? Don’t you know what a woman looks like....?” Now I just think, “well that’s interesting....” I’m not all about ‘I’m a woman, hear me roar’ anymore.

[The conversation shifts to Cole’s role as a public speaker)

SGC: Mostly what I do is this thing with Ron Jeremy...this is a series of debates, mostly on American campuses. I’m really interested in continuing the discussion with young people.

**KH: Isn’t the context really adversarial?**

SGC: Mostly it’s adversarial with the audience, not with him. When I was doing those debates with [Screw magazine publisher] Al Goldstein, I didn’t have to tell women what was wrong with pornography. They understood. It. These young women have taken the language of empowerment (the language that we gave them) and use it totally differently.

The discussion is very polarized in the US. On the one side you have people like Ron Jeremy and on the other side you have the far right and the purity movement. Young women are told they have to be a whore or a virgin. If that were my choice I would probably choose the whore over the virgin. I tell them you need to look at authenticity and what works for you. I’m trying to get them to think instead of being passive receptors.

**KH: And how is this different from the debates you had with Varda?**

SGC: She was coming at it from a feminist perspective. She was supporting the pro-sex movement and thinking about censorship. That movement totally co-opted women. The young women interested in that position now, I think they’ll get over it. Ultimately, if you have to grow out of a position, it’s not very powerful.

**KH: So here you are, decades later debating the same kinds of issues on campuses.**

**Given that this issue’s theme is ‘crux’ what is it about this issue that remains**

# The Link

Concordia University  
Montreal, Quebec

Volume 4, Number 7  
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## Women Take Back the Night

See pages 8 and 9

**so divisive between women in a way that other issues don't?**

SGC: People feel invested in sexuality. It is the one thing that everybody has. This is much more about how you reach a new generation. That's why I went out again.

**KH: Given that sexuality is so intensely personal, can you change someone's mind about what turns them on?**

SGC: I really just want to get them to think about it. ...It's been an education for me, no question. But I can raise some different ideas.

[conversation shifts to sex work]

SGC: I believe two things can be true at the same time: 1) Prostitution is an institution of male domination; and 2) prostitutes have the right to work in safety.

But to call prostitution an exercise in empowerment is factually ridiculous. I don't understand how the violation of your own body can be compared to being a bank teller. I don't understand how that argument gets any traction. Nobody grows up saying they want to be a prostitute.

Women are involved in prostitution because they are economically driven there or they are revictimized because of previous sexual violence. As a feminist I can make sure women are doing it safely and, at the same time, I can

do everything I can to eradicate the conditions that allow it to happen.

**KH: Do you have anything else to add...?**

SGC: I think the really important thing to do as a lesbian or a feminist is to adapt and to change and to get your ideas out there. You can't just look around and throw up your hands at where things are. Young women are coming out in a completely different environment...My partner works at Supporting our Youth, and at Pride I go to their Fruit Loopz fair. If that had been available for me at 15 I would have exploded, it's incredible. I'm not bemoaning the lost generation.

**KH: You're talking about addressing a new context, but you also said that gender fluidity was an early concept in gay liberation, and you are still talking about pornography; how is it new?**

SGC: The trans movement really influenced my thinking on gender.

I have a problem with people thinking they have to cut off pieces of themselves. People shouldn't have to cart themselves off to the hospital to be who they think they are. I want to create more room so that it doesn't have to be limited to just this or that.

**KH: But trans people choose to make that decision.**

SGC: I understand why they're making those choices but my project is to make gender less



PHOTO: FRANCE DESILETS

rigid. You have your body — it does what it does and it feels how it feels. Be with it.

[Two weeks later, we continued the conversation]

**KH: The right for feminists to name experiences outside of society's definitions was a hard-won battle. Which is why I am puzzled by your dismissal of certain experiences as co-opted, or temporary, or simply a reinscription of past victimization. Is there not any point at which a sex worker can positively describe her own experience and be heard? Is that not at odds not with a notion of 'empowerment' but one of 'self-determination'?**

SGC: I honestly think it's important to see real choice, considered choice, no choice and where there is the potential for real consent. If you have to fuck to eat, that's not a choice. The question is the women who say they do it and they are absolutely fine. I believe women and what they say, and I don't say they're wrong. But that's not a circumstance I want to push for, that's not my activist project.

**KH: You also suggested that sex work cannot be considered a valid choice since 'no one grows up wanting to be a prostitute'.**

**No one grows up wanting to get an abortion but that doesn't mean they don't value the option if necessary, nor that they should be made to feel illegitimate or irresponsible for taking it.**

**Are you concerned your characterization of sex workers in those terms does, in fact, reinscribe the stigma they already face from the broader society?**

SGC: I like your analogy to abortion, you've helped my argument. I can protect the right to make that choice. But once you're already pregnant, it is the only choice, the only thing you can do... but you can't pretend abortion is a piece of cake.

Sex workers are so afraid of being stigmatized they had to fashion a fake argument and say they love the work. I understand the political need to get credibility. Get them alone and most sex workers say they wish they didn't have to do it. I want to talk about the reality, not the ideology. That's why I think two things can be true at the same time. It's hard work, and a violation of their bodies, but they have the right to do it in safety.

**KH: I also realised that I didn't address the question of gay and lesbian marriage or families. Odd since I know you made a decision to parent in the late 80s, when there was very little support for such a choice. You rooted the notion of gender fluidity in early manifestations of gay liberation, and you traced your anti-pornography position back several decades as well. Seventies-era gay liberation argued for definitions of family outside of traditional matrimony, like chosen families. How do you trace this trajectory in your thinking?**

SGC: I've been with my partner for 25 years and we have no desire to get married. It's about the institution, the power of the state to define a relationship. But if you deny me something, then I get interested, I'll start liking it a lot. The right wing is denying it, even though it makes no sense given their belief in monogamy and the family.

...

SGC: I still feel like we have more to say about prostitution. It's such a nuanced issue. I don't know if there's a right or wrong. I mean, I'm pushing here, but it's a little like women in abusive relationships. While they're in it, they don't see it, it's only after that they really do. Wouldn't you agree that they'd rather be doing something else?

**KH: Depends on the individual's decision, whether it's systemic or personal. It's one thing to be 15 and away from a horrible home and unable to get legitimate work or paperwork without parental approval, and you need a roof over your head. And it's another thing to want to be able to control your work hours around your kids' schedules or classes you might be taking.**

SGC: I think it's a bit of a reach to say it's about controlling your own hours.

**KH: Ok, setting aside the specious comparison to a bank teller, there are very few people that are racing to any job with absolute glee.**

SGC: But there is a difference because of the value we put on our own bodies. I wouldn't say that bodies are violated, but they are invaded.

**KH: What about Fran Shaver's research on hospital orderlies? They also work odd hours, at night, dealing intimately with strangers' bodies.**

SGC: But the difference is that this is gendered. It's not like as many women are buying sex as men are.

**KH: Ok, but is the reason for that power difference about who has money or how men and women are socialized or a cul-**

**ture that sets up expectations around sexual behaviour?**

SGC: It's all three. But that's because women are valued for sex, body and beauty. I'm glad they're making good money, but the reason for that doesn't turn my crank...

Who is buying and who is selling is telling us everything we need to know about the power imbalance in the sex industry. I don't think we've yet had an honest discussion about this because everyone is too busy trying to hold on to their own turf.

[The conversation ended via email]

**KH: You have returned repeatedly to the question of authenticity and truth in your answers. One of the major lessons second wave feminism taught me was to value women's own articulated experience in reaction to societally manufactured or approved definitions of 'what women want'. The truth of any lived experience trumps what my personal understanding of it might be. I think that's why I am uncomfortable with your suggestions that some women's self-identity (pro-sex advocates, sex workers, etc.) is overly-determined by external factors, or a 'phase' or a misguided attempt to hold a rhetorical position.**

SGC: I don't stigmatize sex workers. I just want to have a direct conversation. Try as anyone might to find one, there is nothing that can compare to sex work. Actually, I volunteered a long time ago to help train medical students in how to do pelvic exams and pap tests. I had eight inexperienced med students rummaging around in my vagina throughout the day and I remember walking away feeling that that was the closest thing I'd ever get to doing sex work.



There is nothing to compare to the physical experience. And from the young privileged med students, I did feel a whiff of contempt because I had agreed to do the work in the first place – even though I was the one grading them!

But I wasn't doing something illegal in order to survive, I didn't feel the need to do drugs so I could dissociate and I wasn't being pimped out by an exploiter.

Of course many feminists behave badly, even when working inside feminist social services. But two things can be true at the same time. Prostitution is an institution of male dominance and it's highly gendered. Men buy (they have the dough) women sell (they don't). And the dynamic does act as a social construct. Sex workers fake their pleasure, johns can't tell the difference, that makes them think the workers

like it and that this population has "naturally" developed to meet their sexual needs. Everybody lives happily ever after.

Sex workers deserve to work in safety and with dignity. Personally, I don't think we have to pretend that sex work is just another job in order for sex workers to be given those rights.

I had hoped to create a space for Cole to have the honest, authentic voice she referred to in our discussions, instead of forcing a rhetorical retrenchment of positions. But there was far too much ground to cover in a couple of hours spread over time and space. I felt haunted by the nagging feeling that if I could just clarify one more point I might understand how political values are shaped or how we construct our truths.



Looking back over this conversation, it seems like we used the terms sex work, violence against women, gender and sexuality while barely negotiating a much more complex discussion about context, power and epistemology. Our conversation can be read as a reflexive discourse on how society, movements and individuals attend to dissenting voices. How do you deal with information you don't agree with? Is discrediting the opposition's voice the best way to defuse the challenge? Can any challenge to existing values (be they individual or societal) be heard without being synthesized through the listeners' own beliefs?

Cole's criticism of the American arguments that align gay rights with racial rights as an accident of biology resonates with me, maybe because of my early understanding of feminism and lesbianism as being essentially combined. But I

was frustrated by the facile equation between victimization and powerlessness that characterized so much of feminist discourse in the 80s. Although shifting the framework from morality to power was an important strategy, defining power as an imbalance of gender, money or status is limiting. Within that framework, sex workers can only ever be victimized because they fall on the wrong side of that equation.

There is absolutely no acknowledgment that power can be reclaimed, shared, shifted, redefined or enjoyed depending on point of view. There is no possibility for the power of imagination or the potential for change.

In a context where power is exclusively understood to be financial or systematic, the power each of us has to deny voice, credibility and agency can be too easily, and I believe erroneously, dismissed.



At some point, I realized that publishing truth to power doesn't automatically change the world. This is especially true in an online context where any perspective or position can be sought out, and other opinions ignored. Given the complex way we filter information, it no longer makes sense to suggest that 'porn is the theory, rape is the practice'. *Molly Shinhat*

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[1] [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Snuff\\_%28film%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Snuff_%28film%29)

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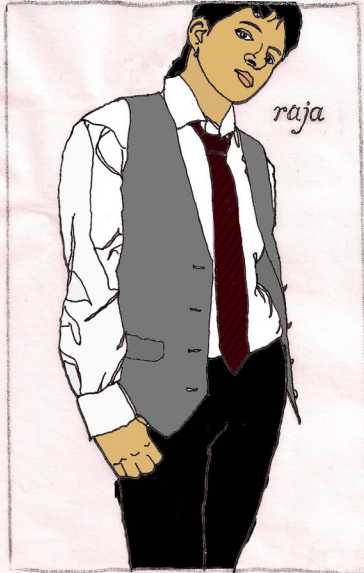
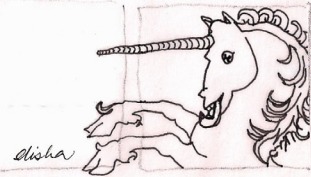
*Karen Herland can not imagine that there is anything else you would possibly want to know about her that has not already been revealed in this essay. Except maybe that she really was born with this name.*

*Susan G. Cole is an author, editor and feminist activist. She has been a political force since participating in the Broadside collective, producing a monthly magazine from 1978 to 1988, the Lesbian Organization of Toronto in 1976 and Women Against Violence Against Women in 1978. She is the author of two books on pornography and violence against women, Pornography and The Sex Crisis and Power Surge and the groundbreaking play A Fertile Imagination. She can be heard every Thursday morning on Radio 640's Media and the Message Panel and is currently the entertainment and books editor at NOW Magazine in Toronto.*

*Photo credits - France Desilets and Molly Shinhat*



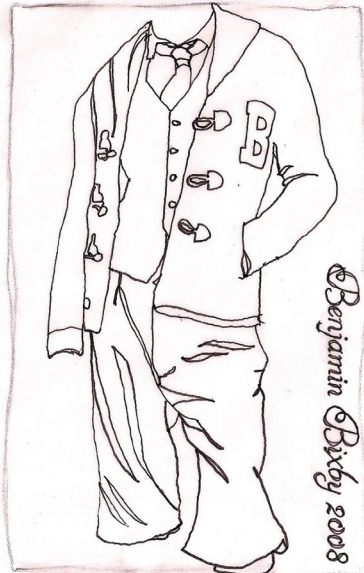
# Handsome



raja

## In the changeroom

When we went into the boutique raja's first impulse was to touch the argyle sweater vests. They were very handsome in yellow, black and orange, and matched up next to blazing orange satin ties in a delicious way. It was a men's store but the assistant made us feel pretty comfortable. She acted as if it was totally normal that we were in there and she didn't ask if we were looking for someone else. When we picked up a tie she asked if she could help make it into a windsor knot. That was nice. raja finally fell in love with a tie in shiny rippling black and red pinstripe and she tried it on with a grey vest and white shirt.



Benjamin Bixby 2008

## pretty

In 2004 Esquire called Andre 3000 "the world's best-dressed man." I find that kind of gratifying because I've always thought something similar. I'm delighted to hear that apparently he would show up at photo shoots with bags full of extra outfits in order to develop his dandy reputation.

So you can imagine my thrill to learn that he had reinvented himself as a fashion designer. Without any training or background. His line "Benjamin Bixby" is based on "images, drawn from college football circa 1935," he told New York Magazine, after a documentary he stumbled across on TV one night. He also described the "prep crew" that he was in, in his Atlanta high school. "It was all about being a prep. It was about ties and saddle shoes and Guess overalls and stuff like that." He describes his fashion inspiration as period pieces like "The Great Gatsby" and old men in his neighbourhood.

"For an African-American guy to be a prep, that's a dichotomy," he told the New York Times. "Prep style comes from mostly affluent families who just wear these cool clothes. But when you come from a background that has more struggle, your take on it will be different. There's a certain kind of rebel to it."

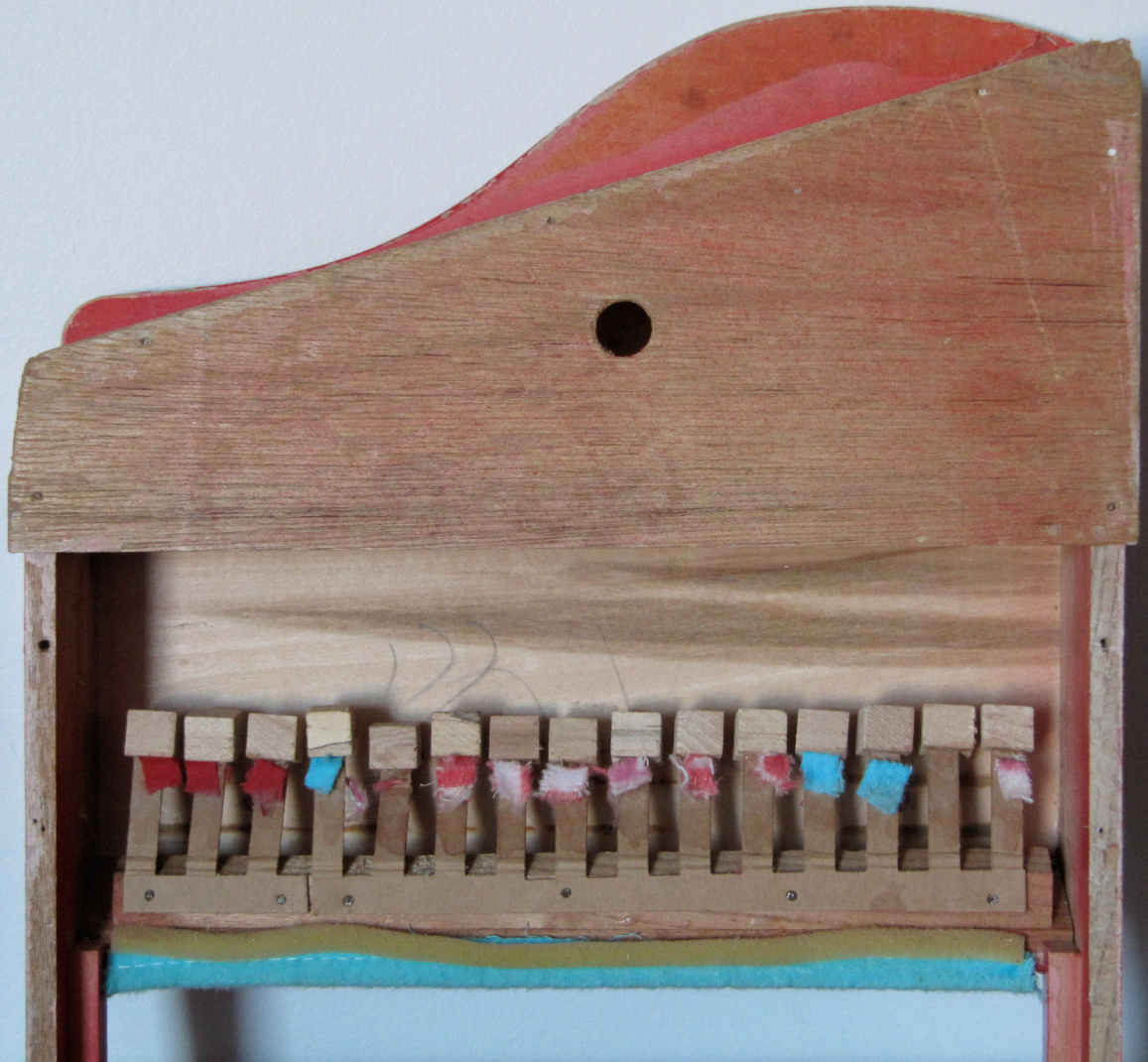
## **THE ILLUSTRATED GENTLEMAN**

*Elisha Lim*

Elisha's previous NMP comic strip 100 Butches has been bought by Alyson Books New York, who publish seminal work like Heather Has Two Mommies and a lot of gay smut. 100 Butches Volume 1 will come out in April 2010, and she's thrilled to bits to be touring with Michelle Tea on her annual American reading tour Sister Spit.

Her new strip, The Illustrated Gentleman, is an illustrated series of dandies, butches, fags and any queers obsessed with men's clothes. It is a work in progress and she would love to hear new suggestions for the subtitles or layout.

*Elisha came out late. When she was 26 she broke up with her fiance and moved to Berlin, which started a sharp learning curve of lesbian squat houses, queer trailer parks, transgender pride parades and an Ethical Slut reading group. She came to terms with her butch identity and draws a comic tribute to a lifetime of butchness from Singapore to Toronto. it has been featured in magazines in Australia, England, Austria and the U.S. and will be published as a graphic novel in April 2010. You can check out more of her beautiful comics here: [www.newhearteveryday.blogspot.com](http://www.newhearteveryday.blogspot.com)*



## **PIÈCE : BABY PIANO. MADE IN CHINA.**

*Myléna Bergeron*

TITRE: Essence de bois.

J'aime travailler de manière à ce que l'essence du son initial soit préservée sans toutefois qu'elle soit nécessairement identifiable.

Je suis très préoccupée par l'origine: son incarnation dans le temps et dans la source sonore. Il est très important pour moi que l'esprit, l'essence de la source sonore, sa chaleur, sa fluidité, sa viscosité, sa précision, sa fragilité, sa résistance, demeurent transparents, perceptibles. C'est l'une des préoccupations fondamentales que j'ai lorsque je manipule des sons.

Dans « Baby Piano – Made in China »... l'essence de la pièce est bois.

*Myléna Bergeron a étudié en chant à l'Université de Montréal avant de se tourner vers la musique électronique expérimentale et l'improvisation sonore. Depuis 2001, elle a développé une méthode de composition qui allie avec délicatesse les prises de son en direct et les altérations les plus singulières. Des sonorités étrangement émouvantes habitent ses paysages sonores enveloppants, évocateurs et narratifs. Elle s'est produit au Canada, au Chili, aux États-Unis et en Chine, en solo, en duo/trio avec Magali Babin et I8U. Elle a créé deux albums, Chronopée (1) et Chronopée (2), sous l'étiquette Oral en 2002 et 2006.*

Site web en ligne au mois de décembre : [www.mylenabergeron.com](http://www.mylenabergeron.com)

Contact : [mylena.bergeron@gmail.com](mailto:mylena.bergeron@gmail.com)

## SHOULD OTTAWA HAVE A SAFE INJECTION SITE?

Nicholas Little

The cover of the August 13 2009 Ottawa Sun asked:

The cover story article by Donna Casey explains how Toronto's Centre for Research on Inner City Health at St. Michael's Hospital is mid-way through a feasibility study, which assesses whether Toronto and Ottawa would benefit from medical clinics where staff oversee drug users injecting or using illegal drugs, including heroin and crack cocaine. Currently, Vancouver is the only city in North America that has a safe injection site.



The study, funded by the Ontario HIV Treatment Network, was originally requested by the City of Toronto as part of its drug strategy. According to Dr. Ahmed Bayoumi, the study's co-principal investigator, the research was broadened to in-

clude Ottawa, due in part to the city's higher-than-average HIV rate.

Predictably, Ottawa police chief Vern White is trotting out the same excuses used by Vancouver police prior to their city's opening of the In-site safe injection site. Interestingly, Vancouver police were won over by Insite shortly after the facility was in operation, and are now supportive of it, as is Vancouver city hall. Nonetheless, Ottawa's police chief says that safe injection sites look good on paper but only wind up helping a fraction of the drugs users they intend to help intended drug addicts. He compared the area around Vancouver's Insite to "a Beirut war zone" and claimed the economic and social costs to the communities around an Ottawa safe injection site would be staggering. "No one wants a supervised injection site in their community," Chief White says.

Not so, actually.

I went to see my friend Chris in his office just down the hall from my own, with pictures of eyeballs and pills and the lyrics to the Velvet Underground's Heroin posted on the walls. Chris has been injecting drugs for forty-four years. Forty-four years. He calls himself the Original Gangsta and describes himself first and foremost as a harm reduction advocate for drug users. We work together at the AIDS Committee of Ottawa.

I asked Chris the very question posed on the cover of the August 13th Ottawa Sun:

"Chris, should we have a safe injection site in Ottawa?"

"Absolutely we should."

"Alright then. Ottawa's Chief of Police says we

shouldn't. So tell me, Chris, why should Ottawa have a safe injection site?"

Here's the list Chris dictated to me as YouTube videos of the Dave Clark Five blared in the background:

- First of all, drug addicts are humans and are entitled to the same health care as everyone else.
- Because most drugs are still illegal and unregulated, they're frequently impure. Until we decriminalize all drugs, it's safer to use them with medical staff nearby to assist with bad reactions or overdoses. They can also help with things like infections and abscesses.
- To prevent the transmission of diseases like HIV and Hep C through harm reduction.
- It'll keep people from using in the streets.
- It will reduce the amount of irresponsibly discarded injection equipment out in the community.
- It lets you use drugs at your own pace and more safely because you aren't afraid of the cops busting you - when you use outside, you're just trying to jam as fast as you can.
- "...and basically, bottom line, the best reason is cost. The strain on the health care system because we don't have safe injection sites is ridiculous..."

That made Chris think of some other stuff:

You know, the only smart thing that former Ontario Premier Mike Harris ever did was implement the methadone program in this province; \$5 a day per person is such a minute amount compared to the cost of running prisons and the strain on the health care system. And it's amazing what it did for the safety of the general community too. With the harm reduction of a methadone-based program, people are being

given their daily dose without having to harm the general community through crime. So it's also harm reduction for the community at large. Not only does it lower the amount of crime, it also lowers the number of people who are going to prison because of that crime. Think of the cost of the prison system! I'm not saying everybody who isn't using methadone is out there robbing people and places, but you get my point. There absolutely are functioning addicts and you wouldn't ever believe they use. The furthest thing from your mind would be to think that that person is a drug addict.

And you know, if you're gonna interview me, you better put something in there about Bill C-15 too. You don't have to explain all the details of Bill C-15. The important part to understand is that, with this Bill, the government is seeking to put more street level users and dealers in provincial jails for drugs. More people in jail! People need to know that there's going to be an even bigger strain on the provincial coffers if this Bill passes in Parliament and the Senate. Maximum-minimum sentencing is equal to the War on Drugs in the U.S.A.

I left Chris to team up with Gladys Knight & the Pips on a red hot rendition of "Midnight Train to Georgia" and headed back to my office, where, not very long after, a young guy I'd never seen before came in to get fresh needles, cookers, purified water, etc.

He grabbed a handful of condoms, so I asked if he also wanted lube. "That'd be great," he said. As I was stocking him up with the lube, he asked, "Hey, do you know if there's a safe place to shoot in the city?" It's pretty rare that someone who injects drugs asks me - someone who doesn't - about safe places to shoot because, really, they're the experts.

"Are you not from here?" I asked.

"No, I just got here actually."

It also seemed odd that he'd asked about a safe place to shoot because nowhere but Vancouver does a place like that even exist.

"Are you from Vancouver originally?" I asked.

"No, I'm not. I just got released from the Pen."

"Ah, okay," I said. "Well, I wish I could tell you a safe place to shoot, but there's no place guaranteed to be safe. There's a guy here who can chat with you about some places that'd be safer than others, though. You want me to grab him?"

"Well, I got friends waiting for me outside. I better get going."

"No problem," I told him. "I'm sorry I can't give you a better answer than that today, man, but come in and see us again whenever you like. And next time you do, I'll introduce you to Chris. He'll explain a bit more about the city for you."

"Cool. I will. It's kind of shitty there's no safe place."

And when you really think about it, what difference would it make if Ottawa had yet one more authorized site where people could use drugs in a regulated, supervised environment? Imagine if the cover of the August 10th Ottawa Sun had looked like this (*image on following page*):

*Should Ottawa have a Bar?*

During prohibition, when alcohol was illegal, many of the problems we currently associate with illegal drug use were also associated with drinking. Corruption, crime, smuggling, impure



and unsafe production practices, public nuisance, chaotic neighbourhoods, private residences operating as makeshift drug stores, illness and death...

The government's classification and the cops' enforcement of certain drugs as legal (nicotine, alcohol) and others as illegal (cocaine, heroin), is entirely arbitrary and prejudiced. The botched construction of Montréal's Olympic Stadium in 1976 left the city with a massive debt. Until a few years ago, the city was still paying it off with a tax levied on the sale of tobacco. Think about it. If you rolled a joint with tobacco in Quebec anytime between 1976 and 2006, possession of pot could land you in jail, while possession of tobacco was not only permitted, the government had a vested interest in your continued consumption. Why do we allow the government and police to rule us in this hypocritical way?

Over time we come to internalize that hypocrisy. Anyone who has worked or partied extensively in pretty much any nightclub in Canada knows that coke is everywhere.

Yet how many times have I witnessed piss drunk people, who were just doing lines off the backs of toilet tanks, walk out of the club and onto the street and openly mock people who smoke crack? Crack and cocaine are the same drug!

When it comes to so many other health and social issues, we have no trouble understanding that criminalization only pushes people further underground and renders them less safe. Imagine trying to prevent HIV transmission among gay men in 2009 if homosexuality was still illegal in Canada, as it was before 1969. Doesn't the history of this particular community being cast out as criminals play into the very reason they are a high-risk group for HIV today? Is it any different with drug users?

I watched that guy in my office head off to shoot up who-knows-where outside, when he obviously would have rather stayed right where he was and done his drugs in safety, and it seemed pretty clear to me what the answer to the Sun's headline question is.

Yes, Ottawa should have a safe injection site. The sooner, the better.



*Nicholas Little is an Anglo-Albertan who decamped to Montreal sometime in the late nineties "to learn French and be gay". He then moved to Ottawa, Ontario, where he was an HIV outreach worker in bathhouses, bars and online chat rooms for several years. In 2008 Nicholas helped found POWER (Prostitutes of Ottawa-Gatineau Work Educate and Resist), an organization of current and former sex workers advocating for recognition of their labour, Charter and human rights. Nicholas recently moved again - this time to the UK - to pursue further studies. You can follow his blog at <http://ickaprick.blogspot.com>*



## SEE GIRL HAS GOT TO HAVE IT: DIYAN ACHJADI AND THE MILITARY COMPLEX

Vanessa Kwan | NMP  
Diyan Achjadi

Diyan Achjadi's work is vibrantly activist, straightforwardly innocent, and colourfully violent. With a palette ripped right out of the seams of camouflage couture, Diyan's practice literally explodes with candy-coated colour and childhood imagery. NMP is thrilled to showcase 3 of Diyan's animations; *Fun With Girl*, 2006, *Overflow*, 2009 and *Victoria*, 2009, accompanied by a text written by Vanessa Kwan and an interview with Diyan about these vividly unforgettable works and her practice.

### **The Eve of Destruction: Diyan Achjadi's See Girl - Vanessa Kwan**

It's not shock or awe. The images are not the least bit unfamiliar. Abstracted, maybe, through the digital palette, the saturated colours, the tidy untidiness. They have the smooth look of fantasy and product, of video games and fashionable colour choices, of symbols whose real-world function is replaced by a pop consumable (Do you ever need pink camouflage, if not for fashion?). Diyan Achjadi's images float somewhere between statement and product; they are, in the push-pull of luscious colour and horrific subject matter, an uneasy vision for uneasy times.

Car bombings, razor wire, camo gear and burning cityscapes—this is the stuff of the daily news, the quotidian dinner-hour reminder of conflict, violence, dissolution. These are not dystopic images, but inevitable ones: logical conclusions to the fucked-up nature of our current global situation. Whether in the interests of “security” or aggression, this is the bed we sleep in.



And the girl is unscathed. She is impossibly resilient, unconventionally gigantic, irresponsibly breezy, in her knee-length skirt amidst pluming smoke and firearms. She wears a gas mask, and striped socks; little Mary Janes with chemical gloves. Wise beyond her years, she survives the worst of it, and her jolly pink form rises well above the blast radius. She is incongruous, a figment. She is the imagined observer, the last gasp of humanity, or maybe, as she towers over landscapes and crushed forms, she's the one who's putting an end to it all.

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NMP

Perhaps she's the alchemical conflation of our fantasies with our fears, the manifestation of an absurd thought—that all that is left in the end is a girl, with a skirt, a gun and a gas mask. And perhaps we'll have to content ourselves with this (because once we're all smoldering, she'll rule the world): it's not quite a clean start, but it's something new.

### Talking with Diyan Achjadi - NMP

**NMP: How is your printmaking practice and your animation practice related?**

DA: I consider my animated works to be a natural extension of my print-based practice. Individual “stills” are made and gathered over a period of time, and then woven into short sequences, expanding on their narrative. As I make my images, I often construct stories in my head around a particular scene, and imagine the gestures that come immediately before and after the depicted moment.

**NMP: Your work seems to reference signs and codes of mass media, and its power structure. What in particular draws you to these symbols and codes?**

DA: I am interested in print media and its social function as a means of reproducing visual and textual information, especially in the ways in which codes of behavior, power structures, and belief systems are manifested in mass-produced works. Print media, through enabling reproduction and dissemination, can be used as a tool of power by entrenching ideologies in a society, while also providing for the possibility of their dismantling. I examine popular mass media – women's magazines, advertisements, mass-produced toys, news programs, and children's books, for example – and the ways that the images and texts generated by these media, through their perpetual repetition, can form an accepted “truth.”

**NMP: Do you see the military complex as selling militarism to kids, similar to how Big Tobacco has been accused of marketing cigarettes to children? How do you create the idea of military in your work?**

DA: Popular media can be seen as a primary vehicle for normalizing ideologies of power. In response, much of my current work unpacks the ways that militarism and militaristic activities are illustrated, appropriated and reproduced in material culture aimed at children. I am particularly interested in the ways that symbols of power are made to seem harmless through their use in entertainment and decoration. Their manifestation in children's toys and juvenile literature for instance, relegate them into the realm of play. Mimicking adult objects and situations, toys miniaturize, sanitize, and simplify. Coated in sugar-sweet colors, they exist within a veneer of harmlessness, using the guise of play to lull and seduce viewers into participation. I appropriate the visual and verbal language used in these media – overly lush and colorful, almost-cute, and seemingly simplistic scenarios – as a means of commenting on and questioning the many ways that our contemporary society is militarized. Through this process, I aim to uncover hidden readings and provide alternatives to dominant cultural narratives.

**NMP: Who is Girl? Where does she live? What is the difference between her life in print and her life in animation?**

DA: My ongoing body of work from the past seven years, *Girl*, centers around a single, awkward, cartoon-character, a forever-flat golden-skinned young girl of unspecified ethnic or national origin, dressed in a simple red or pink dress with knee-high socks and mary-janes. She is the only character in her world. Sometimes she is alone and isolated, towering over a landscape punctuated by puffy explosions in bubble-gum pinks; other times she is multiplied into a perfectly uniform army, marching and exercising in formation. She exists in an

imaginary space, pink- and red-hued, where she may be both the heroine and the victim of a series of vague actions in changing urban landscapes. Each printed picture functions as a still from an unmade animation, deliberately illustrative but frozen out of context.

**NMP: Tell us about Fun With Girl.**

DA: In 2006, I made a series of digital prints called *See Girl (March, Girl, March!)*, where the *Girl* is seen navigating post-apocalyptic urban landscapes, filled with exploded cars and burning buildings. Much of these works were made in reaction to the news reports of the ongoing “war on terror,” and the imagery that was circulating heavily during that time of car bombs, explosions, and various acts of militarized violence. The animation takes the structure of a reading primer, using simplified language to describe the illustrations. In making the animation, I wanted to create a narrative that would call into question the *Girl*'s complicity or innocence in the events unfolding around her.

**NMP: What was the impetus for Overflow?**

DA: In 2006, mud started spewing from the earth in Sidoarjo, East Java, Indonesia, and swallowed whole hundreds of homes, villages, roads, and rice fields. Three years later, it is still flowing. *Overflow* is a reflection on this disaster.

**NMP: Can you talk about Victoria and the project's origins?**

DA: *Victoria* is a departure from the *Girl* series, created as part of the project, *A Little Distillery in Nowgong: A Novel Exhibition*. Author Ashok Mathur proposed to write a novel that could exist as both a book as well as a spatial/physical entity, and asked a number of artists to collab-

orate with him on that endeavour. My contribution consisted of two short animations, *Victoria* and *Going Right*, presented on small monitors approximating the size of a hand-held book. The novel itself traces the story of many generations of a family as they travel from 19th century India to 20th century Canada. In reading the text, I was struck by the underlying narrative of colonialism, and in particular in how the vestiges of the colonial enterprise appear in and impact contemporary circumstances. *Victoria* pictures a famous portrait of Queen Victoria, emblematic of the heyday of imperial expansion, placed on a wall of paisley. Through the animation, we see her literally choked and destroyed by the wallpaper patterns (a nod to *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman), melting off the frame, and transformed into photographs of contemporary Nowgong, India that were taken by Ashok. The sequence ends with the gold-gilt frame collapsing and turned to kindling.

**NMP: You use cartoon imagery in your work situated in environments seemingly constructed by the military complex. What is your interest in narrative structure, and what are the ideological thrusts of your work in regards to narrative, identity and militarism?**

DA: As an extension of the investigation into ideologies of power, I am interested in narratives of belonging, particularly as they reflect ideas of home and group identifications. The language of nationalism – a form of group identification - is often militaristic and chauvinistic, and is drilled in subtle (and not so subtle) ways into a child's education. Schooled during Suharto's Indonesia of the 1970s and 1980s, I regularly participated in marching exercises, group calisthenics, flag-raising ceremonies, and recitation of nationalistic poems. The mili-

taristic culture that informed a large part of my upbringing was also inundated with uniformity and sameness, where being different or individualistic was seen as a mark of deviance or a lack of patriotism. Much of this experience is the lens through which I look at contemporary manifestations of militarism, and informs the situations and contexts that the Girl finds herself in.

*Diyan Achjadi received her BFA from the Cooper Union School of Art, New York, and a MFA in Print Media from Concordia University, Montreal. Her installation and print works have been exhibited across the US and Canada. Her short animated videos have been screened across North America and Europe, including at the International Festival of Films on Art (Montreal, 2005) and Les Instants Videos des Manosque (France, 2003). Achjadi's current work uses print and digital media to explore representations of militarism and violence in pop culture and children's media. [www.achdiyan.com](http://www.achdiyan.com)*

*Vanessa Kwan is a Vancouver-based artist and writer. Her work has been exhibited at a number of galleries, including solo exhibitions at the Or Gallery, Access, and the Art Gallery of the South Okanagan. She is a founding member of the arts collective Norma, and currently works as Public Programs Coordinator at the Vancouver Art Gallery. A public art commission for the City of Vancouver is forthcoming in 2010. <http://nomorepotlucks.org/article/crux-no6/see-girl-has-got-have-it-diyan-achjadi-and-military-complex>*



*The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion  
15 September – 6 December 2009  
Courtesy of Art Gallery of York University  
Image credit: Michael Maranda*

**FORM FOLLOWS FICTION:  
A RECONSTRUCTION OF A RECONSTRUCTION**

*Jon Davies*

**'The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion', Art  
Gallery of York University, Toronto  
15 September – 6 December 2009**

It has become a truism that the collective General Idea has taken its place among the most influential of Canadian artists. What keeps GI's practice relevant and fascinating is that it is so difficult to fully grasp: eschewing the crafting of mere art objects – though they also did that – GI created a complex, multi-faceted and self-reflexive media cosmology out of words, images, events, and products, contributing greatly to the invention and fabrication of a Toronto and Canadian art scene in the process.

The vast array of material that the group produced and disseminated self-consciously spun a mythology of drama and gossip about members AA Bronson, Felix Partz and Jorge Zontal and their self-fashioned status as glamorous artists. GI has spawned an industry in the last decade or so, for example with 'The Search for the Spirit: General Idea 1968–1975' exhibition curated by Fern Bayer for the Art Gallery of Ontario in 1997; 'General Idea: Editions 1967–1995', the touring survey of the artists' editions and multiples – which traveled to almost 20 venues between 2003 and 2007 – curated by Barbara Fischer, and the 2008 re-publication by JRP-Ringier of the entire print run (1972–1989) of their seminal lifestyle magazine (or rather "megazine," FILE (a take-off on LIFE, they even stole their American foil's iconic logo). No doubt partly due to the archival and promotional labours of surviving member AA Bronson, GI is almost inescapable: the canonized, or rather deified, queer saints of Canadian conceptual art. GI's current mythic status represents the fulfillment of the goals of the trio's multi-decade project, but what more could possibly be said about them?



Curator Philip Monk of the Art Gallery of York University has an intimate familiarity with GI's work and their local, national and international contexts thanks to his decades spent as a critic and curator in Toronto, spanning back to the early days of what could be identified as an art scene here. His strategy in mounting a GI show at the end of the first decade of the 21st century was to reproduce as exactly as possible two key exhibitions in the artists' oeuvre from the late 1970s, which he himself had attended but which many in 2009 did not see first-hand (thanks to not having been born yet, for example). Through this act of archival re-staging – which plays out against the backdrop of a surge of interest in historical re-enactments in the contemporary art world over the past few years – Monk seeks to bring into the present-day white cube of his gallery not only the work of GI but of the art community that it represented. Bringing the downtown of the 70s uptown (to distant North York no less) presents a considerable risk because no level of historical accuracy and attention to detail can airlift an entire living and breathing artistic subculture into a different era.

In hindsight these two exhibitions, both originally mounted at the Carmen Lamanna Gallery, seem to embody the broader GI project in a nascent form. They invented a narrative framework describing the elaborate fabrication and spectacular destruction of a fictional piece of architecture. I am referring, of course, to the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion of the title, which is represented here both in its carefully executed planning stages and in its violent disintegration, a before and an after without the actual material existence of the Pavillion standing in between. As a photo caption in the exhibition reads, the “best of all sites was essentially out-of-sight, in the airwaves, invisible.” The non-existent Pavillion becomes a metaphor for

that invisible structure that was most in control of our lives in the late 70s – the airwaves. GI invented free-floating, ephemeral identities and institutions for themselves in a queer mimicking of the mass media and its ability to disseminate the most horrific and the most splendid fantasies at once, from the Vietnam War to the swoop of Farrah's feathered hair. They called it the “architecture of the subliminal.”

In the field of architecture, far more buildings are planned than ever come to fruition, remaining as ideas and models – speculative fictions – rather than becoming realized constructions. Conceptual artist Lawrence Weiner's maxim “The Work Need Not Be Built” could be aptly applied to many influential architectural projects that never saw physical completion. The 1984-seat, ziggurat-shaped Pavillion was to be the stage for the fourth Miss General Idea Pageant (there had been three previous pageants, going back to 1968), to take place in 1984. (Why 1984, you might ask? Because it's a conveniently clichéd shorthand for the subjugation of the masses to the gaze of Big Brother.)

The Pavillion is represented here through architecture, but in fragments. For example, there is the hoarding to mask the Pavillion's construction, which is designed in a jigsaw puzzle pattern to draw the curious attention of passersby. Pieces of the jigsaw are missing, foreshadowing that this project is always to be “in process” – never a product – and leaving those who walk by to imagine and give form to the future building it conceals. There are also the “massing models” that play double duty as high-fashion gowns, crafted from Venetian blinds in pyramidal shapes. (The exterior shell of the building was to be built of mirrored Venetian blinds, which would create a kind of liminal fantasy space between inside and outside – “both sides of the story” – their dazzling reflections com-

pared by the artists to the horizontal scan lines of video.) These architectural evening dresses allowed GI to reflect on the experience of “being an object”: “walking, talking, living, breathing ideas with legs,” with the shoes acting as pedestals, naturellement.

These are some of the elements choreographed in the first exhibition, ‘Going Thru the Notions,’ originally mounted from 18 October – 6 November 1975, which is also characterized by the presence of scores of “showcards.” These are paper forms used for magazine layouts that each carry a single image – many found, others original, with all sources credited – and a long-form prose caption written by the artists. These showcards span the walls of the space punctuated every so often by maquettes, posters and prints, and each originates from a different sector of the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion project:

1. The Search for the Spirit of Miss General Idea
2. The Miss General Idea Pageant
3. Miss General Idea 1984
4. The Miss General Idea Pavillion
5. Frame of Reference

42 Collectively, they form an overwhelming discursive archive of all the ideas behind the initiative, from “Proposals” for architectural features of the space – such as the “Dr. Brute Colonnade” that features men tied to leopard-print columns – to eroticized descriptions of the construction workers supposedly working on the site, to depictions of the motifs and symbols of the pageant, such as the “Miss General Idea Wig,” shoes, vehicle, and the mysterious “Hand of the Spirit.” The most useful section for helping to decipher this complex representational system was the “Index,” which included five maxims, each starting with the phrase:

“\_\_\_\_\_ is basically this: a framing device...” These showcards and the other material on view take us step by step through what the Pavillion will be and what the Miss General Idea Pageant represented. The Pavillion – like the Pageant – was literally a construct, a performance, and, as GI say, a “framing device” for drawing attention to the vicissitudes of visibility, publicity, glamour, and value via an antiquated cultural form. ‘Going Thru the Notions’ is ultimately a kind of database for thinking through how we are transformed by the mass media from individuals into images. But this makes it sound pedantic and nobly good-for-you, which it never, ever is.

This is because what characterizes the majority of GI’s projects across a wide range of forms is their witty signature vocabulary, which uses irony in the service of a playful mimicry of the tropes of the mass media – they seemed to collude, but with a queer difference: a campily askew perspective on the world. In their half-hour self-documenting video Pilot – made for TVO in 1977, and now on view in the back resource room of Monk’s exhibition – they characterize their top three products as “Beauty Pageants,” “FILE Magazine,” and “TV Specials.” Thinking of GI’s oeuvre as so much about media – especially their work with FILE – I could not help but experience the exhibition as akin to being inside a magazine. Monk argues that the principles and strategies of FILE Magazine actually became the Pavillion; that is certainly the impression one gets from the very graphic design of these exhibitions’ mise-en-scènes.

The second exhibition on view, ‘Reconstructing Futures,’ originally mounted from 10 December 1977 – 6 January 1978, goes even further in creating an architecture from discourse, but here the walls are formed solely by images, not by language. The scenography is composed of

large-scale photos of “Composition” – shots of schematic drawings and the Pavillion’s ostensible construction – and “Decomposition” – scenes of disaster, explosion and the building’s supposed collapse. A neon-lit “Iron Curtain” at the back of this chamber veils a large photo of the three soot-blackened and exhausted GI artists escaping from the fire that destroyed the Pavillion. The exhibition also features some appropriately tacky furniture and design elements: “The Marbells and the Seats of Power,” for example, are the remnants of a kind of prep room where performers ostensibly once rehearsed their public appearances in the now-destroyed Pavillion. There is also the “Soundtrack for a Fountain,” which sounded suspiciously like a man urinating. The overall effect in this environment is less of a building’s collapse than of the ruins of radicalism in the face of the ascendant Yuppie, as the furniture and design elements on view could be straight out of a nouveau riche Manhattan apartment of the dawning Reagan era.

Thankfully, I attended the opening reception of the exhibition, and it was just like one of FILE’s gossip columns: AA Bronson and a few of the Miss General Ideas were there, as were Vera Frenkel, John Bentley Mays, Ann Dean, Andrew J. Paterson, and other Toronto art world royalty. Many of these venerable guests acted – intentionally or not – as living archives and pedagogues to the scads of twenty- and thirty-somethings also in attendance: trans-generational dialogue was in the air. Returning to the exhibition after the opening, without this dynamic social and performative element, the installations seemed more like crypts. This static, slightly morbid quality – intensified by the sterile, windowless gallery space – was further accentuated by the fact that the exhibitions are both so discursive – accumulations detailing something that’s not there; they were

haunted by ghosts. (I should take this opportunity to point out that Felix Partz and Jorge Zontal both died of AIDS in 1994.) The Pavillion was a monumental yet intangible embodiment of GI – its home, if you will – one performative fiction to contain another. The Canadian art world that General Idea fabulated and mythologized into existence has long since become codified: the messy primordial ooze of the 60s and 70s now walks boldly upright with protocol and professionalism. A reconstruction of a reconstruction, Monk’s exhibition is in the end a mock-sombre memorial not only to a gone-but-never-was Pavillion but to the “Spirit”: the very possibility of inventing oneself from thin air as an artist and as a (Canadian) art community that GI represented.

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*The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion  
15 September – 6 December 2009  
Courtesy of Art Gallery of York University  
Image credit: Michael Maranda*

## WHO REPAIRS THE LOCKS ON THE TOILET DOORS?

*Liz Millward*

The story of lesbians organizing in 1970s Canada is one filled with adventure. There are violent (and somewhat drunken) clashes in Montréal, between women and the men (bar patrons and police) who expect them to endure harassment. Someone's blood is shed. Knees and voices quiver. Pride in collective action is born. There are public speeches on the steps of Parliament Hill in Ottawa. There are women involved in Lesbian Mothers Defence Fund groups in several cities. They provide support to themselves and each other as they work towards mounting the legal challenges that will allow lesbians to keep custody of their children. On a bright sunny day there are marchers in Moose Jaw who protest against Anita Bryant and her trade marked brand of Florida vitriol. There are virulent scenes of conflict in Ontario and Nova Scotia with those gay men who, as R.W. Connell might say, are complicit with patriarchy and are determined to reap its dividend.

The 1970s see an insatiable demand for conferences which spill over into the next decade. There is a Gay Women's Festival in Toronto in 1973, lesbian conferences in Montreal in 1974 and 1975, Ottawa in 1976 and 1978, Toronto in 1979 and 1984, Vancouver in 1981 and 1983, Calgary in 1988, Halifax in 1987 and 1990. On the weekends when the conferences are held, women cram themselves into university classrooms to discuss nervously and bravely monogamy and non-monogamy, fantasy, masturbation, bisexuality, aging, alcohol and liberation.

They attend the dances and coffeehouses and return to their home communities energised and exhausted. Some of the women are full of conviction that the national lesbian movement is just out of sight around the next bend. Others are disappointed at the infighting between



*photo by Liz Millward*

women who disagree over their visions for the movement.

There are mixed lesbian and gay conferences; some defined as national, some as regional. The Ontario Homophile Federation holds a conference in 1971. In 1973 the Centre Humanitaire d'Aide et de Libération (CHAL) in Québec City hosts the first pan-Canadian conference of gay organisations. In 1976, at what is billed as the Fourth Annual Gay Conference, forty lesbian and gay organisations from around the country meet in Toronto.

They debate the finer points of lesbian autonomy, the relationship between gay liberation, lesbian liberation, and the women's movement and the role of the National Gay Rights Coalition, formed the previous year.

There are angry scenes at the plenary over the resolutions on lesbian issues. The Body Politic comments that discussion "quickly degenerated into disorderly name-calling, much of it among the women." Women storm out of the room and storm back in.

There are more hopeful, more informal conferences too. In 1978 at a prairie gay conference, hosted by the Saskatchewan Gay Coalition, "a strong feeling of regional identity and common purpose are being forged."

What begins as a few items of lesbian paraphernalia available at these conferences and through the nascent community centres becomes a vast showcase of lesbian culture. Lesbians hungry for women-positive imagery provide the demand. The supply comes from lesbians expressing themselves artistically and displaying their wares on stalls at conferences and their talents at festivals. They begin to build a world of alternative media and art. They work on magazines and newsletters, including the more obvious ones such as Long Time Coming, and less obvious ones such as Carousel Capers.

In the 1980s lesbian media blossoms. Amazones d'hier Lesbiennes d'aujourd'hui, The Open Door: Rural Lesbians newsletter, and the Lesbian Newsletter appear. Dykes on Mykes starts to broadcast. The Canadian Women's Music and Cultural Festival in Winnipeg draws enthusiastic lesbians whose presence causes at least one local burgher to ask whether the "festival was not really a type of political front for the lesbian movement." The Metamorphosis Festivals in Saskatoon, started by the Saskatoon Gay Coalition to provide an opportunity to experience gay culture, quickly fill up with women performers and participants. Vancouver's Bi-National Lesbian Conference Organising Committee organises a series of pre-conference cultural events, including a Woman to Woman Art Show with sculpture, textiles, prints, and photography. Branching Out Lesbian Culture Resource Centre in Toronto sponsors a lesbian artists exhibition at a local gallery. Halifax plans an entire conference dedicated to lesbian culture.

The dream of a space just for lesbians—or for lesbians and their gay brothers—is worth pursuing. It is otherwise so hard to find each other. Rural lesbians are isolated. Suburban lesbians

sit combing their children's hair while waiting for their husbands to return. Lesbians brim-full of politics need to caucus, and they cannot do that alone. Besides, women want opportunities to dance together. So spaces are rented in church halls, in Women's Centres and on university campuses. Women provide space in their homes for meetings and phonelines. Across the prairies there are mixed private member's clubs (Club 70 in Edmonton, Carousel Club in Calgary, Gemini Club in Saskatoon, Odyssey Club in Regina, and Happenings in Winnipeg), and for a time women become dominant in some of them.

What is at the heart of this lesbian movement? Is it the sense of pride in shared lesbian identity? Perhaps. Is it lust for the confident woman who openly sports a womyn's symbol button? Possibly. Is it the burning sense of injustice and the feminism to explain it? Probably.

But there is something else, something easy to overlook. At the heart of the movement, in the physical spaces both temporary and semi-permanent where lesbians meet, scheme, plot, dance and drink, sometimes alongside gay men, sometimes without them, are the volunteers. They might be the women who draft resolutions to present at the conference plenary. They might be the women playing guitar who captivate the crowd at a coffeehouse. They might be the women who make contact with feminist lawyers. But most of the time they are not. Many of the lesbian and mixed lesbian and gay spaces are run by boards of directors or small committees. The work required of them has no glamour. They call meetings and attend them, often every week. These women and men are frequently accused of being martinets by community members who believe that they impose unjust rules on in-house behaviour or that they lack political analysis. Yet without the



volunteers – the bar staff, the board in charge of running the space, securing licences, maintaining order, and signing their names on the dotted line, without someone responsible for repairing the locks on the toilet stall doors, there would be no movement. What follows for the volunteers is the tedious slog of creating and maintaining those spaces.

Snapshot 1: It is summer 1972 in Edmonton. The president is writing a message to go in Club 70 News. Members must allow staff to collect bottles from the tables on liquor nights by 1.30am. It is simply not fair to be so rude to them while they are volunteering their time to run the club, and if liquor licensing laws are broken the club might close.

Snapshot 2: It is autumn 1973 in Saskatoon, 8pm in the evening. The Board of Directors of the Zodiac Friendship Society is meeting. They discuss a car pool in order to attend a conference in Edmonton. Two months later they decide to organise a games night as an alternative to the dance night they already host every week.

Snapshot 3: It is winter 1974 in Calgary. 1.30pm in the afternoon. Nine women and three men are in a meeting of the Board of Directors of the Carousel Club. They discuss poor attendance figures. Less than a month later they have the same discussion. The previous month they report to each other that the locks on the toilet doors in the ladies washroom have been replaced. In membership newsletters they express frustration with on-going vandalism at the Club and the need to involve more men.

Snapshot 4: It is spring 1975 in Saskatoon. Six women and two men sort out the business of who will have signing authority for their centre. They also need to consider spending money on

improving the conditions in the office where they meet. Someone has left the main door to the community centre open, which poses a security risk.

Snapshot 5: It is late autumn 1980 in Vancouver. Twelve women are meeting to organise the upcoming bi-national lesbian conference. They spend their time trying to decide between two possible conference locations, discussing the facilities, visibility of the location, amount of space available, cost, and the chance that the presence of the conference might politicize the area.

Snapshot 6: It is late spring 1983 in Toronto. Six women report to each other on the search for a potential community centre location. They deal with the business of accounts and fundraising. There is little time to discuss their collective vision.

This is the heart of the movement. The volunteers who spend hours pouring over monthly, quarterly, yearly attendance figures at regular and special events and try to work out what the community prefers. They learn quickly from mistakes. They deal with difficult members who do not respect others in the space. They cajole women to be friendly to strangers, not to stand around in cliques, to remember how hard it can be to break into the scene for those who are just coming out. They admonish everyone to remember that these spaces belong to the community, not to straight businessmen out to exploit them. They threaten community members with the truism that if they stop supporting the community events, the events will vanish.

Sometimes the committees have a chance to discuss the purpose of the space. They think about the days when alcohol will be served, and

whether it should be present at all. They decide on decor and images, with mixed results. They set limits on where they will advertise, and why. They respond, endlessly it seems, to complaints about the music selection and volume. They patiently explain the nature of the conduct rules to men who resent women's presence, and women who refuse to tolerate men.

One woman spends her entire night repairing tables which have collapsed. A group spends a weekend building a new drywall to create a TV room. Women rent vans to collect cases of beer or to distribute newsletters. Many of them are involved in a lot of different organisations. The amount of work they do is simply astonishing. And one by one they all, eventually, resign. They do not all receive a letter of thanks from the committee or board or organisation on which they served.

Final snapshot: I am sitting in my office. I have copies of the minutes of many of the lesbian and gay organisations which created the movement in the 1970s and 1980s. The minutes list the names of those present at their meetings. I also have copies of the books and articles which have recorded what is considered the public face of that movement. The indexes list the names of those involved. The lists do not match. I know that committee volunteers might need to preserve their anonymity to protect their jobs and children, and not everyone wants the limelight. But they were the heart of the movement. This is my letter of thanks to them.

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## **HOLDING STILL WITH ZOE WHITTALL**

*Renuka Chaturvedi | Zoe Whittall*

Consumers of queer fiction will be excited to learn what devotees already know: that on September 20th, Anansi Press released Zoe Whittall's second novel, *Holding Still for as Long as Possible*. Whittall is the acclaimed author of *Bottle Rocket Hearts*, a queer coming of age story set in mid-90's Montreal, and published in 2007 by Cormorant Press. In her new novel, Whittall continues to do what she does so well: chronicle the lives of twentysomethings who struggle like twentysomethings do—with drama, with booze and with the twin, vertiginous paths of love and sex. *Holding Still* follows the roughly 25-year-old lives of three protagonists living in Toronto's west end. Amy is a filmmaker from a wealthy, sheltered WASP upbringing in North York who is experiencing her first tastes of rupture and grief. Amy's woes stem from the decline and dissolution of her five-year relationship with Josh. Josh is a Toronto EMS worker, a shy and stolid young man who more than anything else seeks to cultivate a life of calm in the face of the frenetic nature of his work and the demise of his formerly unwavering domesticity with Amy. Billy is a former Canadian teen music idol who works in a café, in thrall to panic attacks and chronic anxiety, plagued by self-doubt and the inanition of the anxiety-prone. Arguably, the cornerstone of this novel is anxiety, and the perpetual search for stability in an anomic world.

The book's narrative structure is mainly divided mainly between the first person perspectives of Amy, Billy and Josh, whose self-dialogue reveals their daily struggles with uncertainty and anxiety. But Whittall has buttressed the protagonists' narration by inserting dramatic interstitial chapters narrated by peripheral characters, which document EMS responses to every day emergencies in downtown Toronto (emergencies which, as might be expected by a mind conditioned to Toronto living, involve pa-

tients with gunshots between the eyes walking and talking in a state of shock, drug overdoses, stabbings, and plenty of Vital Signs Absent). Three youths in Toronto, dating unadvisedly, with lives plugged in to cell phones and text messages, overwhelmingly electronic forms of social networking. Whittall asks: Whither a generation that has grown up plugged in to hyper-reality? What comes of always having the immediate means for communicating the rapid and myriad shifts of daily life within a powerfully concentrated city? Well, there is solicitude. Solicitude, apprehension, angst, Sturm und Drang, whatever one wishes to call it, it is there. And to her plot, as additional antitheses to her characters' ability to hold still, Whittall adds the vicissitudes of the Love Triangle. After his breakup with Amy, Josh quickly, dubiously, takes up with Billy and all three characters struggle with the standard discomfort and awkward sociality that comes from the kind of proximity that only queer communities and remote Buddhist outposts can foist upon their members.

In *Bottle Rocket Hearts*, Whittall demonstrated she could write, and with *Holding Still* the author has established that she is a gifted writer indeed. And, in *Holding Still*, Whittall's voice has matured. Rarely does one see an author of Whittall's age and experience who writes with such a strong authorial voice. She is a vivid, visceral writer, whose words are reminiscent of the honesty and intensity of Michelle Tea. But unlike Tea, Whittall's text is polished and elegant, despite periodic inconsistencies of fact.

Throughout *Holding Still*, Whittall confirms her ability to command the full attention of her readers by the power of her prose -her romanticism, her engaging and eminently accessible writing style, and her ability to pepper her storyline with intelligent insight. Indeed, perhaps

the most rewarding aspects of reading *Holding Still* are Whittall's sweet, short insights, the keen reflections that will resonate with her readers or, at worst, give them genuine pause for thought. At times, Whittall's insights are so apt and her analyses of her subject matter so true that an audience will read her words and either look back and nod in recognition, or cringe at younger, more questionable versions of themselves.

And the characters in *Holding Still* are truly emblematic of their age and inexperience. Amy, Billy and Josh constitute an age group whose poor decisions are built seamlessly into the lives they lead, causing boundless ruptures yet few pauses for constructive reflection amid the endless appraisals of their lives. Case in point, the minds of all three characters are bent on certainty, craving it as they crave the alcohol they consume in heroic proportions. But being twenty-somethings the characters do not yet realize (though Billy is starting to suspect) that, like an ill-advised Love Triangle, alcohol wears mental stability apart at the seams. Such sweet contradiction demonstrates Whittall's ability to be bang on, to write characters with lives redolent of their position in life. Of course, the reader can decide for themselves if Whittall's attention to metatextuality is intentional, or just a pleasant coincidence. Regardless, Whittall does write engaging characters and her most recent attempt is no exception. Amy, whose long red hair and haughty manner are reminiscent of Anne-Marie MacDonald's Kathleen in *Fall on Your Knees*, expresses a sense of entitlement to happiness that only a lifetime of privilege can afford. In fact, her shock over the demise of her relationship with Josh demonstrates more about what Amy expects out of life than the degree of her devotion to her former lover. Amy, like Billy and Josh, desires

steadiness and security. But unlike the other two characters who have experienced loss on a grand enough scale to know that life's stabilities are transitory, Amy is still naïve enough to expect constancy in an inconstant world.

Through Josh, Whittall has spoken, if inadvertently, to cis-gendered writers who create trans characters. At the time of the novel's events, Josh has been over seven years on testosterone has re-constructed his body. through surgery, has transitioned. And with Josh, Whittall has done a rare thing-she has written a character as a trans man without binding him to the identity of "Trans Man." Aside from a few scant references to his transition, Whittall writes Josh as a man, full stop. In so doing, Whittall has complicated the way queer fiction has hitherto chronicled trans identities as inefaceably trans by eliding, for the most part, that Josh has spent most of his life in a female body (for a notable exceptions, see Felicia Luna Lemus' *Like Son*). Readers will find that Whittall explicitly and intentionally dismisses the muck and mire of identity politics to allow her character to be what he has always known himself to be, a man.

Whittall's move here is not only thought provoking, but in many ways quite progressive. So much of trans identities in literature get written with an intense focus on the body. In this book, Whittall has done something quite different. Josh has sex, but Whittall only refers to it as sex, she does not think it necessary to get into the mechanics of how trans men get it on. And it is so refreshing to read about a fictional trans man that is simply allowed to fuck. For these reasons Josh represents an important contribution to queer literature, inasmuch as in Josh we see Whittall's attempts to redefine the territory trans characters occupy in fiction. And her achievement is sure to generate dis-

cussion. Are Josh's 17 years in the body of a woman relevant to who he is as a man? Whittall does not think so, or rather, Josh does not. It is actually difficult to differentiate what Whittall believes about her characters, because formulating opinions on the characters in this book requires a surprisingly literal reading, insofar as the characters are to be understood on the basis of their own self-descriptions. And here we arrive at a potential weakness of Whittall's novel: We must take the characters at their word. Ultimately, we must read the characters on the basis of their self-descriptions, which is a rather unconventional means of interpreting a character. Perhaps this is a sign that Whittall is still maturing as a writer. This promises great things for her future work.

But for now, as far as character development goes, Whittall's writing though elegant and engaging and visceral, lacks subtlety. Does an author really want their characters simply announcing how they feel? One of the most powerful aspects of Margaret Laurence's masterpiece *The Stone Angel* is that readers are not to take the protagonist Hagar Shipley at her word. Shipley's character must be discerned from her relationships with others, from the way she moves through the world in spite of how she sees herself. In *Holding Still*, the characters tell you outright what you need to know about them. This saps some intellectual discovery out of the reading process, which, frankly, diminishes the pleasure of the text and leaves more questions than answers.

In an oddly related vein, one unanswered question is whether Whittall has accomplished what she set out to do in this novel, namely to delineate the effects of SARS, Hurricane Katrina, and hyper-reality on a generation growing into adulthood that has always been plugged in. Many authors have seen a shifting global

landscape as productive of the fissures that plague daily life, causing crises of identity and purpose (Zola's *Les Rougons-Macquart* cycle is excellent for this). But what specifically the new millennium's global currents produce in the lives of urban young adults, the specific social effects of specific global conditions, and the interpersonal effects of the explosion of contemporary communications technology are not fully articulated by Whittall, though she expressly wants to explore these relationships. The reader is left to presume what the connections might be, to infer and guess.

Inferring and guessing from a richly written text is enjoyable, but in this book the necessity of inference is puzzling given the way Whittall's has written her characters so explicitly. And this puzzlement is emblematic of a tension in Whittall's work. Namely, the reader must listen to the characters as they explicate their lives, rather than gleaning character from their behaviours, interactions and reactions, but Whittall leaves answers to her larger questions nebulous and up to the reader.

What remains unclear is whether this is intentional or indicative of inconsistencies in writing style and purpose. What Whittall does well she does really well, namely, writing about interpersonal relationships between people who cannot quite bring themselves to see the world as something that exists and persists outside of their own lives. Where Whittall falls short is in linking the individual lives to something bigger, something beyond the personalities and relationships that are productive of the self-same phenomena.

What does not come across in Whittall's book is that individuals are not merely thinkers of ideas and interpreters of their worlds, but are operating in time, place and context, all of which

organize their ideas and interpretations. Whittall needs to link the big picture with the small picture, but the concerns of the characters she develops in this book are too narrow to engage with questions of greater import. And as such, the novel comes across as a little fluffy. Whittall spends so much time in dialogue within and between characters that she does not demonstrate how contemporary technologies and securities are productive of a particular kind of instability that this world, and only this world, can produce.

While Whittall is without a doubt a writer to watch out for, it is also true that she has yet to branch out into speaking about issues of greater consequence than getting drunk, wrestling with existential questions via solipsistic internal dialogue, and having sex. Though to be fair, is this not what our twenties were largely about?

Unfortunately, as Whittall herself attests, the characters are not commentaries on anything other than their own individual characters. In Whittall's words, their instability is the product of a "quarter-life crisis," and not something supra-individual. Were the characters meant to be commentaries on something larger than themselves, then the book would be very impressive in its layering of multiple meanings and its ability to link concretely the wider social, political and technological trends with their manifestations in individuals and in interpersonal relationships. Instead, one should take the book for what it is literally: a well-written novel with engaging characters, where the reader is eager to find out more more more. The book has the power to spark debate, and this is indicative of a book well written. I look forward to Whittall's next novel.

## INTERVIEW WITH ZOE WHITTALL

As living proof of Barthes' seminal essay "The Death of the Author," what Whittall intends in *Holding Still for as Long as Possible* and what comes across are sometimes very different things. But, one might say that the prevalence of points of contention is the crux of a good novel. I interviewed Zoe Whittall earlier this month on *Holding Still*, being a writer, anxiety and how she might fare if incarcerated.

**Originally the book was to be titled *Doing Nothing For As Long As Possible*, and now it's got the *Holding Still* title. I was hoping you would talk about why one title was chosen over the one originally proposed.**

The book changed so significantly while I wrote it. It started out with Billy, Amy and Josh having no idea what they wanted to do with their lives after university. Then I made Josh a paramedic and Amy a filmmaker and the stasis I wanted to capture was no longer real. It was just Billy who was stuck, wanting to "do nothing", while figuring things out with her anxiety.

She needed the spinning to stop, for a moment to breathe, and she just couldn't get it no matter how many times she called in sick to work. It ended up being too negative a title, and seeming too "slacker-generation". Sometimes you have to start out with a big idea and mould it down from big concept to real stories people might care about. And these characters are like the much younger siblings or even children of Gen X-ers. It just seemed more accurate to change it to *Holding Still*, especially given how much anxiety plays into the characters' lives. It was also a play on how often medics have to tell patients to hold still.

**Your characters often draw the distinction in their internal dialogues between people who have anxiety and people who don't. It's how your characters in one way make sense of people, by dividing people into categories of anxious vs. non-anxious. But the way the characters draw these divisions ultimately allow them to single themselves out as fraught, or fucked-up. All these details sound like they come from a writer who understands anxiety.**

Yes. I do understand it. I hope I managed to make a distinction between people who get anxious, like everyone, and people who have disordered anxiety, like Billy. I had panic disorder on and off for most of my adult life and when I turned 30 I really got a hold of it, and was able to bring it into perspective and recover. I was never as bad as Billy—I exaggerated a lot of my experiences to make her a more compelling and tragic character, but I understand her. There was a brief time when I only left my house to get in a taxi, and taxi-ed home, even when I was living on minimum wage. I thought it was just a funny observation, the arbitrary things people with severe anxiety will see as safe. Like, I won't have an aneurism in my kitchen, but I might in the grocery store. The subway is too stressful, but this car driven by a stranger is good. Things will be fine if I wear my lucky necklace, or things like that. It's so absurd and kind of hilarious how we can organize things we can't control in order to calm ourselves.

**What role has anxiety played in your experiences as a writer?**

It plays into my experiences in life— but it also made me oddly comfortable with uncertainty. I think someone who understands occasionally



Zoe  
Whittall

*Author of* BOTTLE ROCKET HEARTS

*Holding Still  
For As Long As  
Possible*

*"Zoe Whittall might just possibly  
be the cockiest, brashest, funniest,  
toughest, no-holds-barred writer to  
emerge from Montreal since  
Mordecai Richler."*

GLOBE AND MAIL



being too afraid to leave the house can take other leaps in life—like trying to be an author in such a tough business—because you’ve already faced the worst fears. Rejection by the literary community after you’ve faced rejection from your own brain, it isn’t so bad.

**Can you talk a bit about your motivations for writing Josh’s character the way you did? What did you want to accomplish by creating this character the way you have?**

I was wary of other books by cis-gender authors who use and exploit trans characters as a way to spice up their narratives, who assume all readers are cis-gender and heterosexual and want to get a glimpse of this “odd person”, the same reason people watch talk shows. I purposely didn’t focus on Josh’s body because so often trans people are dissected and gawked at, especially at the hands of non-trans artists. Mostly, it simply didn’t make sense for the story. I wasn’t telling the story of Josh’s transition. His gender identity was never something I wanted to dwell on because it wouldn’t be organic to the plot or the characters. He’s a guy. His friends and lovers know that. It’s never questioned. He transitioned eight years before the book starts, the book takes place over eight months. The characters weren’t going to sit around the kitchen table drinking and suddenly start asking him invasive questions they already know the answer to. If the readers are confused by what they don’t know, then that’s fine. I like to read books that don’t answer all my questions, that make me wonder and suppose and imagine the worlds presented. I do hope I’ve described him well enough to imagine him, see him walk through the book, believe him as a whole being.

Trans people are part of my life, and the lives of these particular characters. It’s not a plot point

or a weird aspect of their lives. It’s just their lives. I wanted to make sure I was careful not to insert myself into this literary history of non-trans authors misrepresenting trans people for their own benefit. That said, I’m open to criticism.

I know I’ve made mistakes in this book and in all my work; it’s a learning process and sometimes that’s one of the hard things about making art public. You fuck up, you have to be ready to discuss it. I had a trans friend read the manuscript at various stages. He said to me, at one point when I was being super wussy and worried about having a trans character, that writers are always going to piss someone off. Especially when there are so few writers in our communities writing about our communities in real time. You could probably put us all in one room and we could have lunch. My friend suggested that it’s better to have queer and trans characters in a literary world when that’s still really rare, and that representation is going to make a lot of readers happy.

**I found your writing vivid and compelling and the story enjoyable, despite what I felt as an absence of likeable characters. Billy is a wreck, Amy is cold and haughty, Josh is coloured with an arrogance and a self-centeredness that is pretty unappealing. Is the writing of the characters itself a commentary?**

No, the writing of the characters themselves are not a commentary. I find it interesting that you find the narrators unlikeable. They are certainly flawed, but I think the best characters always are. Billy IS a wreck. I love wrecks. I love reading books about girls who are way too sensitive or fucked up to live their lives all that effectively. Amy is sometimes cold, I suppose, in a few instances, though I would not say all the

time, and I have no idea how you see Josh as arrogant. He's almost cripplingly shy most of the time, except at work, and is so tender towards Billy. Books can be so different for every reader. People have come up to me with ideas about why I wrote certain things in *Bottle Rocket Hearts*—fascinating theories or assumptions about my personal life based on content— and they've been so surprising to me. Things I've never imagined. I like trying to make sense of those readings.

### **Do you have any advice to people who want to make a living by writing?**

If you mean want to make a living by writing literary fiction, as opposed to teen vampire novels or corporate copy, my advice is to read a lot, support other writers by buying books, and read some more. Writers who are first starting out often make the mistake of thinking it is easy, and that the first thing they write is gold and deserves to be published. It rarely happens this way. Don't ever hand in your first to tenth draft of anything. Don't think about publishing or the business side of things until you have a solid finished draft. Get a good, solid trade or day job that has nothing to do with publishing and allows you time and energy to work on your off time.

When you do have time to write fiction for long stretches, structure your time well, budget responsibly, don't get discouraged over grant rejections, because it's all a lottery. Save ten percent of all your grants income for taxes, learned that the hard way, don't pay attention to how much your peers get for advances. Read reviews and learn how to suck it up when they're bad. Always show up on time for things and never read over the time allotted for you on stage, I think that's so disrespectful to audiences and readers.

**You've been quoted as saying "Race and gender – well, I think it's impossible to not be impacted by race, gender, class, sexual orientation – all those things - unless you live in a treehouse in the middle of nowhere, but it would likely come up whenever you ventured into town for Cheerios." But your characters are pretty much all white, and this novel reflects white, queer experiences and does not reflect the experiences of queer men and women of colour/s. Could you speak a bit to the challenge I'm making here?**

This challenge is valid. It's impossible to not be impacted by identity. I don't always feel comfortable appropriating voices from cultures other than my own because there is a long history of white writers thinking they can tell everyone's stories for them, but at the same time, this kind of ideology runs the risk of essentialism. I don't think we should only write entirely from experience. In this book I've written from the voice of a rich girl, I've never been one. I've never been a folk singer like Billy. I've never grown up with a violent family or lived in shelters or identified as transsexual or worked as a paramedic like Josh. I think about these issues a lot, as I'm learning to tell stories in different ways. There are many different kinds of absences in the text and I would say in all texts.

### **How do you think you would do in prison?**

This is the weirdest question I've ever been asked in an interview. I love it! I would be terrible in prison. I'm not tough at all. I think I would be terrified. I've never been in a fight. I'm not good in groups. Bullies in high school always figured out I was easily intimidated. I'd probably find some big protective butch right away and try to ride it out, hopefully have some time to write.

*Renuka Chaturvedi is a Ph. D. Candidate studying in Ottawa, Ontario. In her spare time she reads fiction, mails sex toys to people who pay for them, and gives her opinion freely.*

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