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ART MEDIA POLITICS

FUSE MAGAZINE

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Coming out of the Margins:

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Josephine Mills re-values our public art collections

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Ashok Mathur: Identity politics in the post-identity era

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Detail of installation, 2004.

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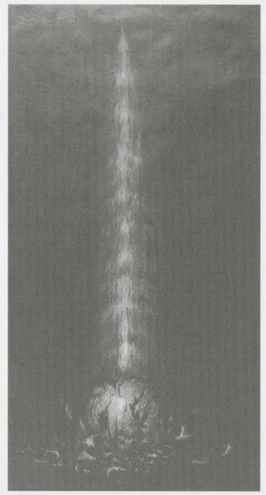

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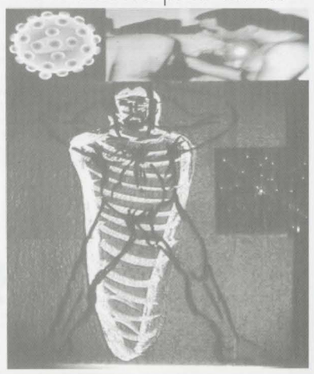

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FUSE MAGAZINE

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Errata

Quotations used in Clive Robertson's *Launching a new ARTWORLD Trusted? Connected? Canadian?* (28:1) were taken from the online petition (Changes to Canada Council Funding: Visual Arts Petition to Canada Council for the Arts) which was written and organised by Ana Rewakowicz and Lorraine Oades.

As well, images used in the Rebecca Belmore interview were all courtesy of Tribe, and the images on pages 27 and 28 were taken by Bradlee LaRocque.

We apologize for these omitted details and promise to do better in the future.

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40 YEARS OF SUPPORT
ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL
CONSEIL DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO

contents 28.2

A third reading based in participation

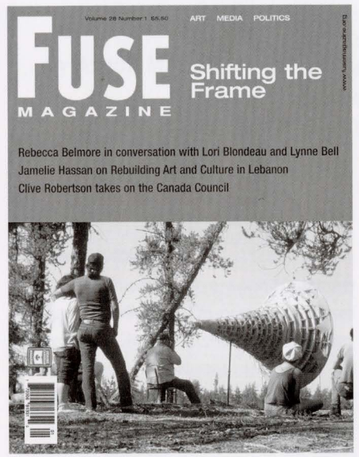
In speaking from the margins, community and participatory art practices provide an analysis that offers a much needed alternative to mainstream practices and institutions. By engaging with issues of social justice and democracy, producing work that isn't object driven, activating and involving a broader audience in creating meaning and recognizing alliances across disciplines and communities, community arts are positioned to offer a critique that is integral to producing a third reading — one that activates an audience to conceptualize meaning through participation.

In a co-production with FUSE, Los Angeles based Ultra-red convened three workshops in which members of artists cooperatives, arts organizations and political groups were asked to consider some of the driving forces within their organizations. Beginning on a Friday night with *Faith* as the spark of hope or conception of possibility that drives the work of these organizations, and the next day moving on to the potentially generative or destructive and fractious impact of *Difference* and the preservation of past struggles through *Memory*, artists, arts workers and community activists sat down together to hash out how their organizations deal with these issues and whether or not it is possible to stay true to the beliefs/structures and history of an organization while dealing with bureaucratization and institutional legitimization.

The negotiation process facilitated by Ultra-red speaks to a lecture Declan McGonagle gave last year at the Canadian Art Gallery Educator's conference titled the *Temple and the Forum Together; Re-configuring community arts* featured in this issue of FUSE. Over the course of his discussion, McGonagle charts a trajectory that moves community arts beyond the margins and into a position of negotiating an alternative set of values with the dominant armature of art institutions and belief systems.

In comparing the relationship between community arts practices and the artist as genius producer, McGonagle makes a number of provocative propositions, including the necessity of adding to the dominant model the ideas of participation, transaction and negotiation, and, to the definition of artist as genius producer, the definition of artist as negotiator and art as porous space where the artist can become a participant in social space and the non-artist can become a participant in art space. He proposes a shift for the art audience from consumer to participant, a shift that would alter the art process from the glacial to the viral.

In effect, McGonagle proposes that the margins, by problematizing the main text, empower the viewer to produce a third reading based on their own active participation. This process of triangulation creates a more fluid negotiable relationship and provides a challenge to prescribed institutional practices.



Dear FUSE,

I did my best to read the last issue on the Canada Council controversy but to be honest I had a hard time staying engaged. While obviously passionately opposed to the Council's course of action, the reason for this passion — both in the articles and discussions around the issue — remains a little mysterious and I am left to speculation.

My feeling is that the Canada Council's programs are now obsolete. The Council recognizes this and wants to do something about it. The Council has said that for the approximately 2000 submissions they receive annually, they only have enough funds to award around 200 grants. That's a success rate of 10%. That means 90% of all applications are being rejected, and the CC's system is thus more akin to a lottery than it is a granting institution, and such numbers also support the rumours that 'there's no point applying unless your friend in on the jury.' Unfortunately, under the proposed changes, that aspect will not change — the number of grants will be limited at 190, and the process now reminds me more of the Ontario Art Council's exhibition-assistance program.

In Tim Clark's article on the rise of Foucault-quotes in Canada (published in 1991 in *Theory Rules* by YYZ Books) he notes that the funding of the Canada Council rose in the ten years between 1965 and 1975 by 686%, from a budget of 3.5 million to 24 million. The budget for the 2003-04 year was 156.6 million, a difference from 30 years ago of 652%. In 30 years, the budget of the CC has risen less than it did in the time span bridging 1970, when the Canadian art establishment's luminaries were beginning their careers. For them to whine now that the Council needs to reorganize it's grant system seems unfair — they benefited from the Council's generous endowment in the past and have done nothing to ensure the same for the following generations. There are now thousands of graduates (something like 20,000) from art schools in Canada every year who cannot benefit as they did. We need to write articles and organize petitions to raise their budget, not complain about them trying to reorganize the distribution of their limited funds.

Getting funding from the Council today requires jumping through bureaucratic hoops. For emerging artists, $3000 three years after graduating from art school can be nothing more than a supplement, and surely can't and doesn't support "research and creation." It may allow you a month off of work, but are artists usually employed by companies that are so generous as to allow a month off?

In light of the recent developments in the United States, Canadians now have new examples from which to distinguish themselves. While we may watch American movies, read American magazines, and know all about their celebrities, Canadians have an experience and a culture of their own. The CBC and Canada Council were developed in response to these realities, in order to give Canadians a voice, and to foster a sense of Canadian culture.

While the CBC has distinguished itself to such an extent that most Canadians are extremely fond of it, I don't think the same can be said about the Canadian Council. Their funding reflects their relevance, and if we want better funding, we should ask ourselves as artists why no else in the country cares.

Timothy Comeau

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5 April 2005
Dear FUSE:

Clive Robertson is more than welcome to voice his opinion on the Canada Council's grant programs (*Launching a new artsworld. Trusted, Connected, Canadian?*); in fact, one of the reasons we held extensive consultations with visual artists was to stimulate debate and discussion. How to strike the balance between support for "art making" and "art enjoyment" — the two prongs of the Canada Council's mandate as stated in the 1957 Canada Council

Act — is a legitimate subject for such a debate, and one which is ongoing within the Canada Council itself.

What is objectionable, however, is Mr. Robertson's accusation that the Council is not listening to what artists are saying. It was clearly stated during the consultations last fall that artists' feedback was not only welcome but necessary to the process of arriving at a final program proposal. In a letter I sent to more than 4,000 members of the Visual Arts community in January of this year, I made it clear that we were well aware of the community's concerns about the original proposal to change our grants program for individual artists, and that we would take those concerns into account in drafting the final version of the new program. We have done so, and we expect to announce that new program later this spring.

Given his expertise and knowledge about the visual arts in Canada, we would welcome Mr. Robertson's suggestions on how to solve our basic dilemma: there are 15,000 professional visual artists in this country and the Council has only enough funding to award 220 individual Visual Arts grants a year. The only way this will change, not only for the Canada Council but for arts funders at all levels of government, is if decision-makers recognize the importance of the arts to Canadian society and increase arts funding accordingly. We need strong and vocal advocates on behalf of the arts, and we would hope that Mr. Robertson — together with visual artists across the country and the national service organizations which represent them — can join forces to help make that happen.

François Lachapelle
Head, Visual Arts Section
Canada Council for the Arts

Leaving it be: what we talk about when we talk about political shifts

by Ashok Mathur

The invitation

It is late morning on a warm September day in 2004 and I'm occupying myself with that twenty-first-century part-procrastinative, part-requisite habit of checking my day's email. I'm sitting in my office on Granville Island, taking periodic breaks from the onslaught of messages by looking out at the cement plant across the road, reflecting on the academic term to come and the past two-and-a-half years I have spent at my job teaching and developing arts-based courses at the Emily Carr Institute. On this particular day, I'm remembering the phone call I had with the then-Dean who offered me my current position those years ago, how I tried to negotiate time to coordinate, with other faculty of colour, the diverse needs of a campus like Emily Carr. My request was met with silence — not that of resistance or hostility, but of resignation. Faculty of colour, she told me, was me. That was 2001.

Today, checking my email, there is a note from a former Emily Carr student Vanessa Kwan, wondering if I would be available to act as respondent for a Powell Street festival panel titled "Leaving it Be: apathy, activism, and ethnicity in contemporary practice." Its intent would be to investigate how the identity politics of the '90s have become passé in a contemporary art world, giving way, perhaps, to related expressions of diversity articulated through interdisciplinary models. And, if this is the case, how we might track the relationship between the interest in race and identity activism in the '90s and the contemporary interest in new media and cross-disciplinarity. I respond to her almost immediately, blathering on (as I am wont to do in email conversations) about the need for this panel and my delight in being asked to participate. Because, while it is some thirty months since I was hired at Emily Carr, and in that time I have been joined by three more permanent faculty of colour, I want to make and hear noise about where we think we've come to in terms of equity. There have been seismic shifts in the last decade, more pronounced in some areas than others, but significant and troublesome to various degrees. So, yes, I write to Vanessa, I will respond to this panel. Lights up, let's talk.

The panel

It turns out that several of the panelists participated in the IntraNation residency that I directed at the Banff Centre in the summer of 2004, an event that focused on artistic production in contexts framed by national and other forms of identity. That residency makes for an easy transition to this panel, plus there is an overarching

familiarity with the issues amongst all the panelists as their work, their ideas, have travelled within similar circles. As moderator, Ken Lum, nationally and internationally known for his large-scale photo installations, sets the tone by posing a question about the meaning of the nation-state in the context of diasporic populations. He bends this back to the local, suggesting the Vancouver conceptual-arts scene made attempts to peer outside its borders, to incorporate internationalist concerns, but that this ultimately failed. Lum's introductory notes, delivered to an obviously attentive and engaged audience of about 100, allow the panelists that follow — Cindy Mochizuki, Linda Sormin, Henry Tsang and Jin-Me Yoon — to more fully explore, through their own practices and historical specificities, the intersections of identity, cultural activism and art.

Henry Tsang, *Orange County,* video still, 2003–2004, Courtesy: Henry Tsang

It's a well-orchestrated and polite panel, participants showing their work, raising pertinent points and staying on time. Upon closing of the formal presentations, questions from the floor are equally polite and searching, and when the day is done panelists and audience retreat to a nearby watering hole to continue the conversation. It is, as they say in organizing circles, a success. But, perhaps swayed by nostalgia and yearning, I leave the event with a sense of ennui. Where was the passion, the anger, the deliberate provocations that spilled the debates of the early '90s out of artist-run centers and gathering halls onto the culture-war pullout sections of the *Post* and the *Globe*? Where was the delight, too, the laughter and excitement as new cultural arenas were broached, old systems were at once obliterated and rejuvenated? And given that none of this was present, only slightly ironic in that *apathy* was the first-named subject of the subtitle, where are we, as an intellectual, activist, artistic community? Or, and this is more important, where are we going, on which trajectory triggered by which history? Far from being overcome by nostalgic longing, I find myself investigating the tactics of the panel and panelists further because these artists are most certainly responding to the climate we now endure, and while the immediacy of change-by-protest that delineated the '90s may now be, well, a thing of the past, there is still an urgency at work, albeit marked by uncertainty.

Identity Reformation

If the mythic '90s were marked by an insistence of presence — disenfranchised groups and individuals demanding to be seen, heard, and included — the current decade, awash with the reemergence of unapologetic militarism and fresh new enemies in the mist of a globalization that means everything and nothing, is typified by a desire to keep up. But that keeping up often amounts to a type of shape-shifting, or, more accurately, the grand extension of postmodernity's desire to slip freely between identities. Not just an ability to rustle off one's skin in serpentine manner, but a type of reverse-ecdysis, a shuffling *into* another's shedded outer layers, embracing a type of passing through borrowed appearance.

In such a space, a voicing of identity-location is lost in an echoey chamber where claims bounce off metaphoric walls, amplifying themselves in creative and grotesque manners. Case in point, Tsang's "Orange County" (OC), a video installation that takes viewers to a very different OC (yet similar in a way that would do Baudrillard proud) than the one they may see on TV. Tsang documents a body, his body, a body-read-as-Asian walking through the streets of Orange County, California, and Ju Jun, the OC replica built by a wealthy Beijing development company for China's elite who want to live the American dream but still be able to commute to work. Tsang's installation has him walking through these two same/different neighbourhoods whereby

> the figure moves from one space to the next almost seamlessly. But there is the lag time in between; is it the time zone difference, the jet lag? Where does he go? When he reappears, nothing has changed, the clothing is the same, the knee-length black jacket, the slightly scruffy black jeans that don't quite match but don't quite position him as a target for police questioning. He is Chinese, so he flows from America to China and back without restriction, without question. Twenty years ago, he would not have been able to pass; he would have been too western in one, too Asian in the other. But now, the worlds have collided, we are the world, there will be a Starbucks nearby soon.

Tsang goes on to question how the very nature of what constitutes normalcy in mainstream culture is shifting radically, dependent on information, perception and power relationships. We may revisit the theoretical notion of the mimic men, whom Homi Bhabha once cast as "white, but not quite," although today's mimic men, at least in certain circles of profit and wealth, might be read as attaining a quality of "whiteness" without leaving the comforts of wherever home may be. Identity reformed and re-situated. Tsang may not pass unproblematically in both/either of these spaces, but his installation illustrates how he does pass *through* OC China and OC USA in manners enabled by a globalized economy. The white-only spaces of an upper-crust California and the absence of the westernized or Canadian-born Chinese in the suburbs of Beijing has given way so that identity in such locations becomes much more slippery. Interestingly enough, Tsang still questions the legitimacy of his body in both these places — it may exist corporeally in these planes, but its existence continues to trouble the spaces themselves.

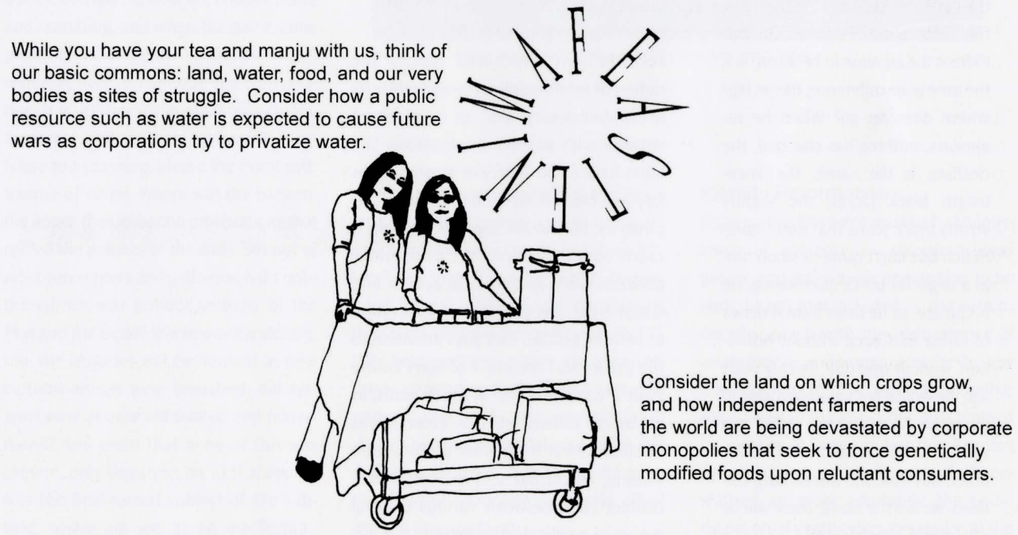
For her part, Mochizuki frames the notion of interdisciplinarity and ethnicity in contemporary arts as a place of struggle with positive implications. She looks back to the legacy of artists such as Roy Kiyooka whose model of interdisciplinarity, Mochizuki suggests, informs a much larger practice, acts as a bridge between work as a cultural activist and visual artist. She proposes a revisitation of identity politics that pays attention to the theoretical construct of Mary Louise Pratt's "contact zone." In other words, as an artist whose practice emerged as public interest in identity politics were waning, Mochizuki sees the continuing contact zone between various cultural groups as a critical entry point to this dis-

cussion. By example, she refers to her performance with Rita Wong during the IntraNation residency where the duo, calling themselves "FeastFamine," performed a perambulatory piece in downtown Banff. Strolling up and down the main drag pushing a dim-sum cart filled with "decolonization wishboxes" the duo gave the boxes away along with information sheets detailing First Nations histories in the geographic area of the park. Both Mochizuki and Wong have talked about how this performance was variously read as an act of intervention into the social fabric, a commodifying act (as in, what are you selling?) and a performance that placed their gendered, raced bodies into a place of contention. To have bodies that are read as young, female and Asian addressing issues of colonized land and responsibility to First Peoples directly marks a categoric shift from the identity politics of old. Here we have not a representation of the self but, like Tsang's reconsideration of how his body is read in different geographic and political climates, a representation that foregrounds neither its own particularities nor its specific histories, but a relational and ethical position.

The work of Mochizuki and Wong clearly indicates a shift from what Yoon calls the "stakes around identity" that prevailed when she was entering the field of art-making. Yoon calls attention to the former valourization of marginalization and emphasizes that contemporary times call for new forms, among them a continued contextualization of the nature of identity. She expresses an interest in the "hauntings," the spectres, that is, the notion of the body as cipher particularly as the racialized body is constituted. Following the gestures made by Mochizuki, Yoon notes that we need not shift away from taking positions, but that to be most effective we need to structure these positions within the material aspects of our work. Yoon exemplifies this in projects like her "Unbidden" installation at the Kamloops Art Gallery, in which she refuses to present literal representations of place or action but, in so doing, allows viewers to situate themselves in a space of their own memory and contemporary reality. The body is troubled, disturbed, but very much present in such a space.

Courting Risk

How does it look, then, to inhabit a racialized body in a racialized world that is largely informed by events that affect us locally and globally? If Yoon, Mochizuki, and Tsang are correct in pursuing a critical analysis that, on one hand embraces a continued awareness of subject positioning but, on the other, wants to engage with political and artistic concerns



Cindy Mochizuki, *FeastFamine,* Drawing, 2004, Courtesy: Cindy Mochizuki

beyond the frailties of the skin, the question of strategy comes into play. Of course, employing multiple strategies in the pursuit of theorizing a minoritized discourse is hardly new, but what does take on an urgency is the question of how to work this so that such strategies have a progressive, political effect. Linda Sormin talks about moving to an abstract narrative, seeking out ways of embodying a physicality that becomes a metaphor for living in a particular body. Her ceramic sculptures epitomize this movement. "At once aggressive and vulnerable, the massive, precarious forms have the capacity to injure me, and I to destroy them," Sormin writes.

> My practice is an attempt to persuade the clay to behave (and misbehave) in ways that are new to me. The possibility of ceramic material moving, distorting or "failing" in the firing is something that excites me. This speculative approach offers a high level of drama and delight for me as a maker. The bravado involved with my working large scale, and the macho — and oxymoronic — activity of "orchestrating risk" is at odds with the compulsive, fussy, dolling up of my pieces with gold, copper and silver leaf, ribbons and flowerets.

Sormin's work and critical approach may not represent the body in any literal way, but like the projects of her contemporaries — Tsang's "oc," Mochizuki's "FeastFamine," Yoon's "Unbidden," where the body clearly *matters* in a visually represented way — Sormin situates the body in relationship to her precarious sculptures. It is impossible to stand beside her labyrinthine sculptures without being enticed to slip a finger, a hand, into the foreboding lattices and thereby inhabit the physicality of the work itself, and, in so doing, read one's own body into the art. Identity shifts from the representational to the relational.

Palimpsestry and overwritten narratives

Some months after the panel and here I am poring over notes, both those I jotted down during the event and those sent to me by panelists in response to my desperate plea for language that will help me address the critical topics of the panel that, at once, excite and confuse me. No, not the panel itself, which was clear, cohesive, and as I suggest in the opening of these maunderings, quite polite — but the ideas that brought the panel into being. This is what the Powell Street organizers were intent on investigating:

> In the contemporary art world, identity politics are said to be passé, a theoretical and practical model associated with work that had currency through the 1990s. Contemporary art institutions, funding bodies and critics now emphasize work that is "interdisciplinary", work that embraces "new forms", work that, having sufficiently dealt with the inequalities of the past, looks firmly to the future. This panel is concerned with the point at which identity politics and its embedded struggle for new modes of expression intersects with the emergence of interdisciplinary practice as an increasingly legitimate (and appropriate) approach to art-making. In a context where many young artists seem reluctant to tackle "cultural issues", but embrace cross-disciplinary practice and new media freely, it seems an appropriate time to address the place of ethnicity and activism in contemporary art practice.

Linda Sormin, *Ploen-nanofolk*, 2005, Courtesy: Linda Sormin, Photo: Clarence Sormin

ward) from our evolving past, that is, a past that is constantly rewritten as we reflect upon its value and substance? Such a palimpsestic reading, a squinting, peering, microscopically intense gaze, allows us to pick out fragments of what once was, not to reconstruct them wholly, but to take them in proprioceptively, pull them into our bodies directly, let those fragments inhabit us as much as we might inhabit a Sormin sculpture.

If the recent past is a palimpsest, partially erased but readable in its remnants, then we cannot help but view the identity movements of the '90s — full of bombast and righteousness as well as acute criticality and political awareness — as historically significant and omnipresent. We have not left the politics of identity behind us, nor constructed an elaborate camouflage to continue working in the same old ways. What we have done is build upon the tremulous ground beneath our feet. The narrative I want to suggest is one where we have not turned our back on our past but scrutinized it, sorted carefully through the bits and pieces and cobbled together a comprehensive response. Call it new forms that owe their existence to previous ones, or interdisciplinary practices that developed out of oppositional politics, this is still an artmaking that comes from urgency, from political need. Our strategies might shift, our causes might mutate, but we will continue to read our pasts into our contemporary lives, and in doing so, will write out our futures.

During the question period of the panel, there was considerable focus on seeking out the narratives that describe where we are, who we are, in a contemporary reality. It was Yoon who summed this up succinctly when she noted that such a desire for meaning could only be satisfied by looking at what lies underneath our constructed realities. This palimpsestic process is not as evident as it might first seem, for Yoon's comments suggest not an existential search for meaning in the depths, but a peering *through* and *at* the layers of history and practice. We might readily acknowledge that we construct ourselves through various histories, written or unwritten, well-known or rumoured, authentic or questionable. But in particular, how do we learn (and what remembrances do we bring for-

Ashok Mathur holds a Canada research chair in cultural and artistic inquiry at Thompson Rivers University in Kamloops and is associate professor at the Emily Carr Institute in Vancouver. All quotations in the article were drawn from Powell Street Festival promotional literature and from the unpublished presentations by panelists.

Drawing Detention: A Conversation with No One Is Illegal

interview by Oona Padgham

No One is Illegal (Toronto) is a group of immigrants, refugees and allies demanding an end to detentions and deportations and the regularization of all non-status immigrants in Canada. Approximately 20,000–200,000 immigrants live in Canada without full legal immigration status. The majority came to Canada on visitor or student visas or as refugee applicants. Their status lapsed or their applications were denied. Non-status immigrants live, work and attend schools in our communities. They pay taxes, raise their families and participate in Canadian society. But people without official immigration status live with the constant fear and uncertainty of their lack of status being discovered and ending up in jail or detained at a detention centre like Toronto's Heritage Inn.

No One Is Illegal works on developing and supporting campaigns for immigrants' rights through education, mobilization and networking. Our primary focus is on people who do not have full legal immigration status. We organize forums, rallies and days of action. We are actively involved in the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" campaign in Toronto, which works to make city services available to all Toronto residents, not just those defined as "legal" by the state. Recently, the group also launched the "100 Days for Status" campaign for regularization.

There are people held on immigration violations in jails across Canada, but Toronto, Montreal, Quebec City and Vancouver also have immigration detention centers. Approximately 8,000 people are deported every year. Each converted hotel room of the Heritage Inn can hold up to four occupants. Men and women are segregated, separating families, and children are also held in detention. Detainees are incarcerated until their documentation and citizenship is confirmed or they are deported back to their country of origin. This can take anywhere from a few days to several months.

All images are by members of the NOII art group, 2004, Courtesy: NOII art group

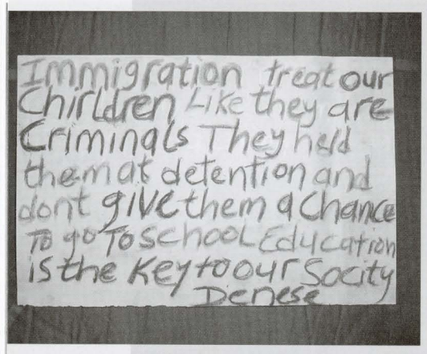
Looking inconspicuous on a strip of suburban highway near the Toronto airport, the Heritage Inn is neighbor to a mall, a few hotels and a Tim Horton's. Contrary to its name, the hotel no longer caters to travelers but serves the menacing purpose of an a immigration detention centre — a fully functioning jail that holds up to 300 people at any given time. Surrounded by fences and coiled barbed wire, entering the site means passing layers of security and once inside, accompaniment by a guard. Detainees are closely monitored, mostly confined to their rooms with very limited access to the outdoors and exercise, and their movements and activities are closely monitored and controlled.

In December 2003, No One Is Illegal began an art group project with the women and children being held in detention. Each meeting of the art group begins with an overview of the political work that No One Is Illegal is involved in. The images produced by the women and children in the group include depictions of homeland and longing — the landscapes of Costa Rica, the beaches of St. Lucia, the fields and deserts of Iraq. Others communicate messages about their hopes of Canada and the realities of detention.

This past fall, members of the No One Is Illegal art group Jean MacDonald, Farrah Miranda and Sima Zerehi sat down with Oona Padgham to talk about their work.

Oona Padgham: Why did you start an art group in the detention centre?

Sima Zeheri: I was doing other work in the detention centre and it was clear that something was needed, some kind of positive activity. When someone suggested we do an art group it seemed like a good way of relating to people who did not all speak



English. Art was also something that was both totally distracting and completely different from the everyday routine people were facing. We thought we could use the art produced to do outreach and education, to build awareness around detention.

Through the work the women and children produce and by interacting with us, they can get a message across about their situations in detention. A lot of their work is political, whether it's images of their homes and families or explicit political messages. Often their art talks about wanting to stay in Canada, wanting to be free, that they are not criminals and that they shouldn't be in detention. It gives them an outlet to tell their stories.

Farrah Miranda: It also gives the women a social space free of guards where they can talk to each other. It gives them a chance to get out of their rooms and do something that is actually human.

Jean MacDonald: The only other activity open to them is watching television. At the Heritage Inn, women are separated into three levels and wouldn't otherwise have any opportunity to talk to each other. The art group is a really big deal, especially for the women and children who have been in there for a long time.

OP: Many of the women and children are very traumatized by their experiences in detention. Do these issues come out in the art group? How do you deal with that?

FM: There is so much pain in what these women and children have experienced. The group provides a space for women to talk if they want to.

SZ: There was this Iraqi woman who had just come into the detention centre. She was the only one in hijab and the only one who spoke Arabic. She was totally traumatized. She didn't know what was happening, or where she was. She came to the group after being pretty much lifted out of bed by some of the other women. She was under the covers and had been there for a day and wouldn't even stick her head out. She came down and drew a picture of a corpse bleeding. She communicated that the corpse was her husband and that Saddam Hussein had killed him. That was as much information as she could get across to us.

OP: Did she keep coming to the group?

SZ: She was only there the one time. She was deported.

OP: How is the art group different than you imagined it would be?

SZ: I thought it would be more grim. There were days when I was working as a volunteer with an NGO that provides basic services at the detention centre and I would see forty people and thirty of them would be in tears. But in the art group you also see people supporting each other, see how they survive, and keep up their sense of humor and joy of life and optimism. There is also almost a forgiveness of everything that is happening to them. I feel awed and humbled by the people inside for their courage and perseverance. To see these women support and help each other survive is an affirmation there is humanity in the worst, most desperate contexts.

FM: Prisons are set up to separate people from one another, but no matter how the immigration and enforcement authorities try to keep people isolated from each other, they can't take away the support and connections these women share. The art group is the only thing at the detention centre that pulls all these women to the same table, looking at one another, facing each other.

OP: How does the art group effect the lives of the women and children in detention?

SZ: Some of the stuff that happens in the group continues after the session. I know there are connections made between some of the women because I see them outside hanging out after …there is spillover.

JM: In some of the activities the women work on a project together. One time we did profile drawings of shadows. One person stands and the other person does the profile and then you color in your own profile. People were laughing. It was really fun and we always have music on. I specifically remember this one moment. The song "The Lady in Red" was playing, and almost everyone in the room started singing. It was so funny.

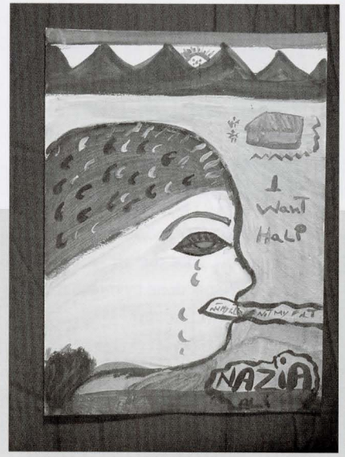
SZ: Since we began the art group, a couple of the women who have been in detention for a long time started doing an origami project that took off through the whole centre. It started off with little birds and moved to huge, intricate pineapples.

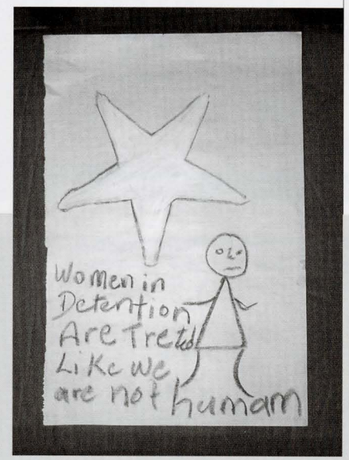
OP: And this didn't come from you guys?

SZ: I think the art group inspired them. One of the women knew how to do origami and it just took off. There were assembly lines of women working on this big pineapple using newspaper, magazines, whatever they could get their hands on. Art in the centre has really taken on a life of its own.

Children in Detention

OP: A lot of people don't realize that Canada regularly incarcerates the children of non-status immigrants. What did you learn from the art group about the impact of detention on children?





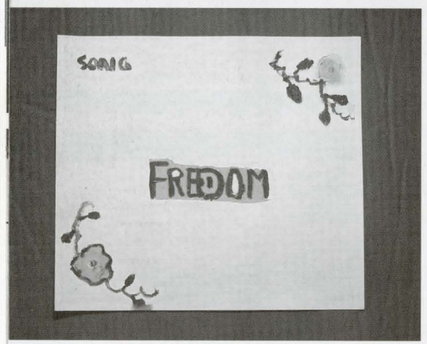
JM: I remember this one little girl who was three years old. When she and her mom came to the group she had lots of energy and was running around and excited to be painting and drawing. Two weeks later, and again another two weeks later, she became an almost entirely different child. The physical and emotional effects of one, two, three months and onward of detention on a three-year-old child are very striking.

FM: There was a period of time at the Celebrity Inn — where the detention centre used to be located — over the winter when detainees were not allowed to go outside. This went on for months. There was a small fenced-in area in the back and no one was even allowed out the door, and there were very young children in there.

SZ: Almost all the women that we work with both have a strong sense of family and are dealing with the tragedy of separation and broken homes. They don't know where their sons or husbands or fathers are. The heartbreak of terror and loss is overwhelming.

FM: Women who have children have this terrible burden of trying to hold it together so their children aren't equally terrified. They don't have anyone to talk to, they can't cry or yell, to show their anger and frustration. They try and hold it in. The strength of the women who do this is incredible.

JM: I remember one woman whose daughter was with her. I think she was eleven or twelve. The mother had this terrible guilt for what was happening to her daughter. It wasn't her fault, and I am sure she knew that deep down, but at the same time she wanted so badly for this not to be happening to her daughter.



Making Connections

OP: How does the art group fit into the overall work done by members of No One Is Illegal in Toronto?

FM: It gives us a sense of who is in the detention centre and what communities are being targeted in Toronto.

SZ: We also get a sense of how people are arrested. We see the connection between police, employers and landlords and being in detention. There are huge numbers of people, mostly men of colour, who are randomly stopped by police, usually when driving a car. Women are often the targets of landlords who want to increase the rent or evict them, so they report them to immigration. Employers often post bail for detainees and then withdraw the bail when people demand wages.

FM: There are also women being held who have called the police for assistance and been thrown into detention as a result. This effectively tells abusers that it's acceptable for non-status women to be abused. As political organizers we know that we have an urgent responsibility to send a very loud message to our government that this lack of protection for women in abusive situations can't be tolerated.

SZ: It's really brutal to see women doubly victimized: first at the hands of their abusers and second when they call the police for protection. Often times, the reason they walked into a police station or called 911 is totally ignored when their lack of status is discovered. I have had women in detention again and again crying, just wanting to have the police go and question the person they reported, to somehow make it all worth it. Some of these women still have scars and bruises on their bodies.

JM: The work we do in detention makes it urgently clear how necessary a "don't ask, don't tell" policy is in Toronto. When women end up in detention because they've reported a sexual assault or laid charges of domestic abuse, there is obviously a huge problem. Similar cases arise for families who are living underground after a deportation order has been issued — if they try to put their child in school, it's likely that Immigration officers will be waiting to arrest them. People become extremely vulnerable to exploitation. A "don't ask, don't tell" policy that allowed all city residents to access needed city services would help protect these people, and help create a healthier, more just city.

SZ: I don't think any other kind of work would have taught us so much or made us as committed to this area of activism. And I don't think it could have been done with a different group of people. I think there are certain areas of work that have to be done by women. I don't know how to stress this enough.

As part of the Mayworks Festival of Working People and the Arts, No One Is Illegal will be exhibiting works from the Detention Centre Art Group at Still Lounge, *458 Queen Street West, Toronto.*

The Temple and the Forum Together: Re-configuring community arts

by Declan McGonagle

Last June, Declan McGonagle spoke at the Canadian Art Gallery Educators annual conference held at the Art Gallery of Ontario. In his discussion, he laid out a trajectory for rethinking community arts beyond the margins as well as reconfiguring the language and practice that define and give meaning and value to art.

Entrance to a Protestant community in Derry, Ireland, Courtesy: Declan McGonagle

Through my work in the Irish context, I am known as someone who, while very focused on and prepared to foreground access and participation (even when working as the director of a national institution like the Irish Museum of Modern Art), is very wary of the term "community arts." In the Irish context, and I am sure in others as well, this term has become self-marginalizing. It has become a sort of compensatory activity that sustains the perception that "real" art happens in one place and "community arts" happens in another, usually less successful economic place.

Even in the late '70s when I was working at the Orchard Gallery in Derry, my sense was that the term was not a useful description of participatory and democratic artistic practices. There seemed to be a lack of interest on the part of many people operating within the community arts sector to address the power relationships on which their marginalization rested, between participatory and what I would call signature practice. In some ways, many people seemed comfortable on the margins, bonding within the positions they already occupied rather than attempting to bridge to new ones. The crux of this problem is that the community arts sector has been

very good at getting its hands on the means of production. There is a lot of community arts activity going on. What it has failed to do — and it is not really a failure because it was never attempted, certainly not in Ireland — is to get its hands on the means of distribution. In society, this is where the power lies, in the distribution mechanisms for finished products, in the galleries and theatres. These are society's means for classifying and conferring the value of culture. These classifications are stacked vertically, according to a particular set of historical values.

As a result, participatory practices are relatively powerless in relation to what I call signature culture. Signature culture, for me, is a definition of artist as individual genius producer and all the support mechanisms that exist to sustain and project this idea within the society, of which there are many. Prior to the idea of signature culture is the definition of the artist as artisan, and we have now had what I would argue is essentially a century of the idea of artist as genius producer. I think one of the mistakes that community arts made, and again "mistake" might suggest that people weren't thinking but they were just too busy doing the work, was they did not secure their own memory. The value of signature culture is defined entirely by its memory banks. That is what positions it as a powerful mechanism within society, still.

This century of signature culture, the idea of artist as individual genius, provokes fundamental separation between the artist and community and the artist and society. This model of artist has nothing to say about social space, an idea with origins in the early nineteenth century that was fully articulated by the mid-twentieth century in the development of an institution like the MOMA, for instance. In this case, the word museum was used quite deliberately to confer authority on a process that we fundamentally have to re-negotiate — the separation of the social and moral responsibilities of art from its aesthetic responsibilities. If you read some of the documents by the founders of the MOMA, they were quite deliberately trying to dislocate the relationship between the artist and society, for the artist and art not to be seen as functional in society. And they are quite entitled to do whatever they want. I am not saying that they are bad people. Theirs is one view that unfortunately has become a dominant premise in determining the models of institutional and even art production subsequently. Of course, that view has been challenged in recent decades.

When I was director of the Irish Museum of Modern Art, in our opening show we attempted to illustrate these differing perspectives through a series of installations of work that included pieces by Donald Judd, who believed the artist has no responsibility in social space and that great art operates in a separate zone that obeys distinct, observable and separate laws. We showed his work in a series of galleries in the seventeenth century Royal Hospital building in Dublin in which the museum is housed. In another part of the building we showed a work by Hans Haake, which refers to the issue of Nicaragua and the Contra guerillas in the early 1980s. The Haake work, "The Freedom Fighters Were Here," uses a news photograph in which a family is carrying the coffin of a child killed in a Contra raid. Then

Irish Museum of Modern Art, Courtesy: Declan McGonagle

Hans Haake, *The Freedom Fighters Were Here*, mixed media, Courtesy: Declan McGonagle

US-president Ronald Reagan had described the Contra guerrillas, who were attacking a democratically selected regime, as freedom fighters. The piece also includes flashing lights around the image, on a facsimile of an archetypal cinema frontage, a reference to Reagan's B-movie background.

Now, with these works in mind, the point isn't that I approve of Hans Haake and don't approve of Don Judd or vice versa, but the need for a public institution to take responsibility for setting up a dialectic between those two polar positions. Where Hans Haake believes it is absolutely the responsibility of the artist to speak and have a presence in social space and has developed a language to do that, Don Judd proposes the contrary, saying the artist has no responsibility in the social context.

The artist as separate, genius producer is a core Modernist idea and is supported by a very powerful armature of values that are social, economic, political as well as cultural. Until very recently, we have been working through that model of separation in terms of art production (what the artist is supposed to do), art distribution (what the curator is supposed to do) and art experience (what the public is supposed to do), as if the public and social discourses only come in at the point of consumption. The Modernist model is also a consumer model.

The other interesting thing is that key proponents of signature culture pretend this armature doesn't exist. That great art is great because it is great and it is in the museum because it is great and it is great because it is in the museum, that this cycle somehow occurs as a natural and inevitable process. There is a huge amount of justification and pretence, a sort of conjuring trick, which pretends there is no scaffolding of political and economic value holding those positions in place — a scaffolding which is confirmed even in its transgression. We have in art now, a sort of orthodoxy of transgression that is sought out by the very institutions the transgressor is trying to attack. And that is because the forms of transgression still confirm the original model of the artist as an eccentric, individualistic, perhaps mad figure. This transgression may look like an attack but it represents no challenge whatsoever to the inherited

matrix of value. The minute anything emerges that represents a real challenge, however, it is marginalized. This happens within societal processes and institutional processes, especially cultural institutional processes.

What I am recommending overall is that we have to renegotiate and reconfigure these inherited models, not burn down the model of the "Temple," but to use its power for other purposes, to put alongside the existing armature another armature with a different set of values that are in negotiation with this dominant frame: The temple and the forum together. Not one or the other. In ancient Rome, the forum was the place where social interaction took place. Physically located at the steps of the temple, one had to ascend its steps to get into the temple, and you then had to negotiate the temple through the priesthood. That is the model that is still operating in a lot of cultural institutional practice. The public is offered access to the value of art through narratives of authority and the priesthood of curators.

What we should be adding to that model are ideas of participation, transaction and negotiation, and, to the definition of artist as genius producer, we should add the definition of artist as negotiator. We can leave undetermined the form of the work that might arise from the negotiation — a porous, negotiable space where the artist can become a participant in the social space and the non-artist can become a participant in the art space.

This interest is already visible in the practice of many contemporary artists working transnationally within a maturing generation. These artists want and need to reconnect with lived experience and don't have any difficulty producing work that attempts to do this. What they come up against immediately is the narrowness of our mechanisms of distribution and this is where problems arise. That energy, that desire to connect is dissipated, and artists like Damien Hirst and Tracey Emin, for example, engage with the social in the disempowered cul-de-sac of celebrity. We have to open another space, another way of thinking and reconnecting with life and lived experience.

This traditional perspective of the artist, which is now under renegotiation, actually disables the viewer, turns the viewer into a consumer. What this communicates is that the value of art is glacial, that it only releases its value over the long term and that artists and curators own this process. What I am proposing is that if we can activate and support capacities that are already functioning within social space, within people, then we can think of the value of art as viral — a sort of connecting, infectious process that doesn't (as was suggested once by an art historian) have to wait for a 100 years to know whether it was a great work of art or not. Our job is to facilitate that shift from consumer to participant, to shift the art process from the glacial to the viral.

I would illustrate these ideas of shift and participation as central, not marginal in historically validated art by referring to Hans Holbein's painting *The Ambassadors,* at the National Gallery in London. The painting was produced for one of the two Frenchmen who were ambassadors at the court of Henry VIII where Hans Holbein was the court painter. This is a very political painting; it is also a lens-based work.

Holbein used lenses regularly in making his work, like many artists of the time and in that sense this work has a very interesting correlation with Hans Haake's piece, in terms of its political nature, its deconstruction of power and its "technology." Political because, on first reading, Holbein's painting is supporting the idea of the power of these men. The realism of the pictorial language was developed not for aesthetic purposes alone. It was developed and used because the viewer had to believe these men were so powerful and rich they could afford to dress in silk and fur. The viewer had to believe in the silk and fur so the paint had to be mistaken for silk and fur. Here the aesthetic language was in the service of the political and is a Modernist if not a modern work. And it predicts, it seems to me, the future of Modernism on one level, and its fixed point of view. What opens this work up is what happens when a viewer stands in front of it and then moves a distance to the right. The strange amorphous shape becomes legible as a skull — a *memento mori,* which were traditional in paintings of the time. What is interesting here is that when one makes that physical shift, when the observer shifts his/her position, a new meaning is constructed. The viewer constructs a new meaning by making that shift and becomes a performative reader, a participant in the making of meaning. Of course the question here is why did Holbein use a different optic in painting the image of the skull? We know it would have been perfectly acceptable to include the memento mori image in the usual way. So why did he "score" his painting so that it forces the viewer to become a reader by making that physical shift?

Holbein was building into the core of this work the idea of participation; the idea that at the simplest possible level, through a physical shift of position, the passive viewer becomes an active participant and the work becomes "performative." That is also what Joseph Beuys meant when he said everyone is an artist; he didn't mean that everyone was an artist in the sense of manufacture, but everyone can contribute to making meaning in the art process and the art experience. In this way, art becomes transactional; a negotiable empowering process that connects to capacities we exercise every day in our lives. We negotiate our world to survive. If people negotiate social space all the time why then should that capacity be suspended when they come to a traditional art gallery experience? With that capacity suspended, the compensatory exercise of education is needed, facilitating the structural power relationship in which we mostly operate in large institutions.

Hans Holbein, *The Ambassadors,* oil on wood, 1533, Courtesy: Declan McGonagle

There is a very interesting story that Damien Hirst tells in relation to his earliest medicine cabinet works. When he was a student at the Royal College and took his mother to a white box gallery exhibition of contemporary sculpture he noticed she was extremely suspicious and wary of the experience, very guarded and distrustful of the gallery space. On the way home, Hirst's mother had to go in and buy medicine at a pharmacy, and he noticed that in the pharmacy she was not suspicious. She was incredibly trustful of the transaction in the pharmacy and yet in the pharmacy had somebody made a mistake, she might have been given medication that could have harmed or killed her. He started making this body of work as a direct response to what he had observed of his mother's experience, as a reflection of his desire to make something that connects to social space and functions with that sort of value and power.

Although Hirst and others are constantly usurped by the Modernist armature of values, we must remember that Modernism is a relatively short story if you take the human project as a whole. We need to step back and look at the long story of art and the way it has functioned throughout the human project. I want to expand on this point by referring to imagery from some medieval manuscripts, their pious texts and profane margins.

Many of these manuscripts were unique objects, prayer books, Books of Hours, of Psalms, commissioned by rich people to assist them in their devotions. In the margins

of the main pious text, they often had incredibly crude images, often very sexually explicit, often based on local proverbs. Until recently the line of thought suggested this marginalia was doodling, simply the product of boredom on the part of the monks who were, endlessly writing out these scripts. A new reading, however, is that the marginalia is positioned deliberately in order to problematize the main text. The pieties would then be countermanded and the reader empowered to make a choice and therefore to participate in the construction of a third reading. The margin here, triangulating the reader and the core text, is just as important as the centre, and the two together create a third meaning based on participation.

We know we have our own pieties in the art context; and that the shorter narrative of Modernism tends to be exclusive, narrow, vertical and hierarchical. We have internalized this socially, economically and culturally, as inevitable and somehow natural but, of course, this is only part of the story. The idea of triangulation within which meaning and value is generated and made available is a more open and dynamic configuration.

The English literary critic John Carey has said that Modernism is the revenge of the bourgeoisie for the emancipation of the working class in the nineteenth century, and I think it is worth holding that thought in mind. In a context like Ireland where colonization took place through political and militaristic as well as cultural means, it is the idea of inevitable powerlessness that gets internalized. And that can happen in institutions as well, we often feel as if we are eavesdroppers on someone else's narrative. That principle has to be attacked and altered. The process that I recommend is participatory, inconclusive, horizontal and longer, not shorter term. The idea is to create a discourse that is predicated on the principle of including those not already part of the discourse, however and wherever that has to occur. It is about a bridging process and not simply a bonding in positions already occupied.

There is a mural wall in Derry where I am from, with a text that reads "You Are Now Entering Free Derry," which represents a key foundation myth for the Catholic Nationalist community in Derry, the idea of being powerless in that particular society. The statement, "*Tiocfaidh ar lá*", Irish for "our day will come," crops up elsewhere in the form of graffiti and in slogans like it from the Catholic community. It represents the idea of freedom borrowed from the anthem, "We Shall Overcome," from the American civil rights movement.

Mural wall in a Catholic nationalist community in Derry, Ireland, Courtesy: Declan McGonagle

But there is another mural wall at an entrance to a Protestant community in Derry that states another key foundation myth for the Protestant community. It articulates an ownership of power and a refusal to surrender it. Other slogans, such as "not an inch," "no surrender" and "we will ever forsake the blue skies of Ulster for the grey skies of an Irish Republic" also represent a community mindset.

Obviously the context in Northern Ireland is very dramatic, but in localized drama, with its polar positions, I think principles are revealed. Another example of this is from an area in Belfast where three streets meet at a junction that became notorious as a location for rioting. Crowds would gather, and often British Army vehicles would position themselves on the corner because they could observe three streets from one location. Someone then painted an Armalite on the wall, knowing that the army vehicle would park there, beside the image, which was pointed at the vehicle. What that person was doing was exactly the same as the medieval scribe, s/he was putting oppositional forces together, power and powerlessness, in an attempt to problematize that power and offer it to the reader or, in this particular case, an opposing rioter.

In the Northern Ireland peace process there is also a telling element of language, a very interesting phrase that emerged, which I think is very relevant to our discussions, and that is *parity of esteem.* After many unsuccessful attempts at peace negotiations, this process has succeeded, in as much as it has so far, because there was a recognition that this could not be an issue of victory or defeat, that this had to be an issue of coexistence. What parity of esteem attempts to suggest is that there is no desire to turn Catholics into Protestants or Protestants into Catholics or to say that one has right over the other. It is about creating a civil society where parity of esteem for identity is acknowledged and driven forward. The idea is to create a third space, in which both communities, in the case of Northern Ireland, can inhabit, like the reader of the medieval manuscript, or the viewer of the Holbein painting.

I'm not suggesting we apply a sort of orthodoxy to the approach, because artists make work with all sorts of different intentions. But it is the idea of coexistence with parity of esteem in which meaning is made in the space between, not locked mysteriously into the artefact to be unlocked only by the priesthood and then delivered to the public in some after-the-fact program. Rather, it is to see, and care for, where necessary, artefacts because they are catalysts for the process of performative reading that I am recommending as central to the art process. This is a counterpoint to the nineteenth-century idea of the integrated self and the autonomous art object.

The question is not, as educators hear all the time, what does it mean? The question is, rather, what do we mean by it?

Traditional art history seeks consensus on the basis of accumulated fact — fix the meaning and value, then pass on the authoritative view. But I believe that art is actually contested in its making. In a way, artists don't know what they are doing, which is why they make art. If they knew what they were doing and could predict the outcomes, it would be knitting. Great art is contested in its production and the way to convey that energy is to create a contested experience, a dialectic that creates multiple points of entry. This approach can operate within a work or between works or exhibitions or programming strategies or components of an institution.

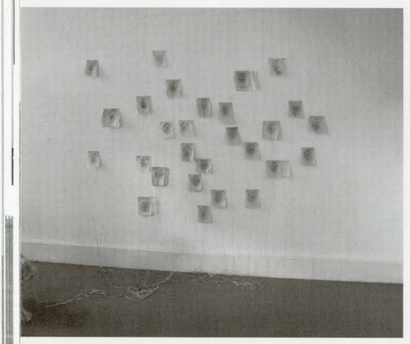
At the Irish Museum of Modern Art we worked in this way with artist Kiki Smith to create a retrospective exhibition for which she proposed a body of work that would include no texts whatsoever, no title cards, no introductory panels, no text in the catalogue. She installed the works in a way that created visual and experiential narratives. Her project started with discrete figures, and then moved through a variety of figurative forms into glass animals and natural forms which ultimately seemed to dissolve into a "ground." This exhibition coincided with an Andy Warhol

retrospective, *After The Part*, which was curated by the Irish Museum of Modern Art. The exhibition set out to reposition Warhol, beyond his reputation of celebrity trickster, as a fundamentally traditional artist, almost a "folk artist" of the twentieth century, dealing with images and meanings of life, experience and death, in traditional terms. His emphasis on *memento mori* in his late works echoes Holbein and many others.

We also included in this exhibition drawings by his mother. Julia Warhola used to draw angels and cats constantly and taught Andrew Warhola and his brother to draw at the table in the evenings. These were among the very first pieces a visitor saw on entering the exhibition. On another wall of the same room were a set of illustrations that Warhol did when he was working as an illustrator for shoe and fashion magazines. These were extraordinary and we could have, but did not, position these as some sort of "outsider art." They were just his mother's drawings and they had been kept and conserved by Warhol. This was trying to suggest that Andrew Warhola existed before Andy Warhol did, that there was a real person behind the mask that Andrew Warhola had very successfully created. If there was no literal text available in Kiki Smith's space, people were coming to the Warhol exhibit carrying enormous texts in their minds about what he was and what they were coming to see, based mostly, in the Irish context certainly, on received opinion.

Thus, at the same time that Kiki Smith was in the museum's west-wing galleries, Andy Warhol was in the east-wing galleries. In the central galleries, the first spaces one enters in the whole museum, we included an exhibition called *Once is too Much.* This exhibition was the product of a series of workshops run by Rochelle Kaplan, a printmaker from Canada who came into the studio program and was introduced to a group of women who had been working with the museum since 1990. The women's group was from a local organization in the neighbourhood called St. Michael's Estate Family Resource Centre. They met a number of times with Rochelle and after a series of workshops and a lot of discussion, decided to create an exhibition dealing with domestic violence. They created as huge dinner table as a centrepiece and above it installed a chandelier, which, if you looked closely, was actually made up of kitchen knives, scissors, bits of broken glass, things that had been used in domestic context to injure women in incidents that often began at the domestic dinner table.

Julia Warhola, installation view, Irish Museum of Modern Art, 1997, Courtesy: Declan McGonagle



Kiki Smith, installation view, Irish Museum of Modern Art, 1997, Courtesy: Declan McGonagle

Family Resource Centre, *Once is too much,* installation, 1997, Courtesy: Declan McGonagle

At this moment in the late '90s in Ireland, there were a depressingly high number of women being killed in domestic situations. Each one of the women who had been killed in that particular period, was commemorated by a lily on the glass shelf in the installation, and, as time went on, and this show toured Ireland, new lilies were added. The women also created a video installation projected onto hospital curtains pulled around an empty hospital bed, a work which was eventually acquired for the museum's collection.

I have spoken in seminars where curators of collections have become very annoyed and upset by the idea that a work was collected from a community process. I think there is a necessary debate still to be initiated around the collecting process in institutions.

The point was you could come into the museum as a member of the general public to see the Warhol show or a member of the art public to see the Kiki Smith show, but you could not get to either without going through *Once is too Much* as a contextualizing experience.

This process of juxtapositioning is not about misrepresenting what Andy Warhol was doing or what Kiki Smith was doing, it is about actually trying to say there is a longer, wider story, there is a broader story than that which is discernable from a single, fixed (Modernist) point of view.

This is very interesting in terms of the empowerment that took place with that group of women. Out of this they developed an organization that ultimately insisted on having a political role within planning for the redevelopment of their estate by the city council. Because St. Michael's Estate was one of those places that, when the media visited, it was always to talk about problems — drug culture or whatever, always done in a sort of heavy documentary way — they decided they would counter this with a huge banner in which everybody in the Estate was photographed, smiling. This public piece is called *The Smiling Wall.* They also created their own gallery space in two of the apartments on the ground floor of one of the blocks, and made a viable classic white box in which they programmed their own work, which was viewable by appointment only.

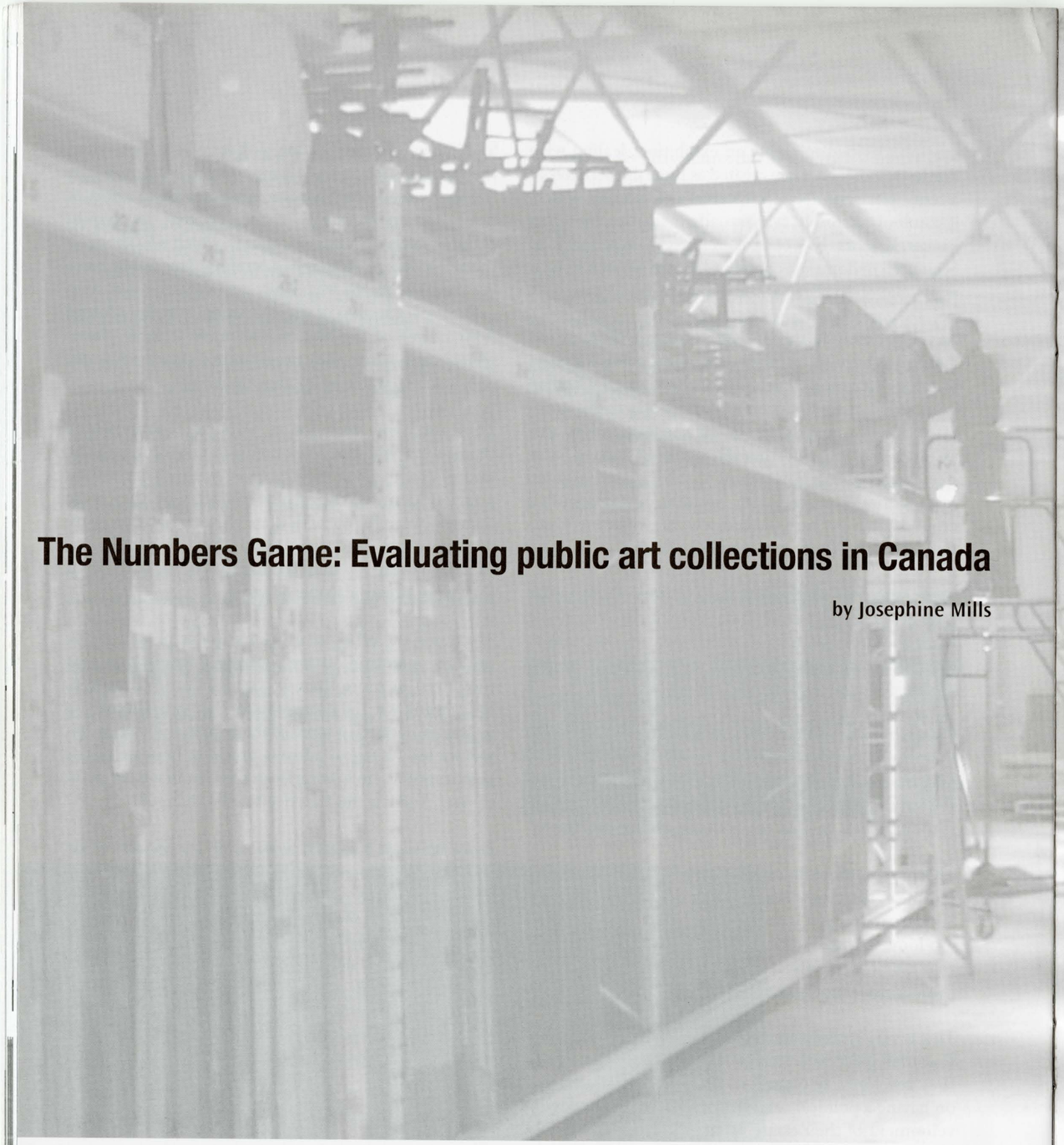
They used the museum as a tool and empowered themselves, which is a key point, to take on board the idea of a white box gallery space with a very strong political identity. They knew exactly why they were doing it, were highly articulate about what they were doing and why, and the museum had simply become the mechanism, an opportunity for people to do what they were already capable of doing.

Museums and other institutions disable people all the time by operating on the received presumption that they need us more than we need them. And I sometimes think we, the professionals, the "priesthood" are in greater need than some of the groups and communities we are trying to address precisely because of the presumptions emanating from the idea of a fixed point of view, And it is this that needs to be changed.

Declan McGonagle is an artist, curator, writer and educator. He was the founder of the Orchard Gallery in Derry, the director of the Irish Museum of Modern Art and director of Exhibitions in London. Most recently he was the director of the civil arts inquiry, a three-year review process undertaken by the City Arts Centre, Dublin. He is currently the director of Interface, *a new practice-based research program at the University of Ulster's School of Art and Design. One of only two curators ever to have been nominated for the Turner Prize, McGonagle is chairperson of the board of the Liverpool Biennial and is a contributing editor of* Artforum *Magazine.*

The Numbers Game: Evaluating public art collections in Canada

by Josephine Mills



Art vault storage facility, University of Lethbridge, Courtesy: Josephine Mills

> The political imagination [...] is discomforted by [the current] characteristics of rule, and powerless to evaluate their consequences. The oppositions that haunt them and animate them — state/market, domination/freedom, public/private, compulsory/voluntary — are themselves ghosts of liberal political philosophy. They are, as it were, founding rhetorical elements within liberal programmes and strategies of rule; no wonder, then, that they have so much difficulty in analysing their own conditions of possibility.[1]
>
> – Nikolas Rose

> "People lie. Numbers don't."[2]
>
> – tag line for the television drama NUMB3RS.

For those who work in the arts, the binaries that Rose cites and the shifts in how they have been positioned are readily familiar. The terms and assumptions that once belonged only to for-profit private sector enterprises have become the mainstay of populist rhetoric, positioned as relevant to public activity ranging from health and education to the arts and social assistance. This spread of business discourses and the logic that goes with them is far from benign. Within the earlier context of liberal rule, public art galleries were formed

and arts professionals were empowered to run them based on knowledge, education and experience. A key aspect of the new belief that business discourses apply everywhere is that such expertise has no foundation; instead, experts must prove they meet supposedly objective standards of accountability and they must use quantifiable statistics to do so.

Resisting this change is proving difficult. On the one hand, those who have worked in the field for years are haunted by the old discourses and want to keep using the same binaries, even though they are now discredited. On the other, it seems easy to go with the flow and simply use the numbers demanded by grant applications and corporate sponsors.

The effect of applying business logic — of using the language and assumptions of the for-profit sector — to public institutions is clearly visible in the dispute over the Beaverbrook Art Gallery's collection. This institution has been in the news recently because of an argument between the New Brunswick gallery and the British and Canadian Beaverbrook Foundations.[3] What sticks in most people's minds is that the two paintings featured in the conflict, a J.M.W. Turner and a Lucian Freud, are worth an estimated $30 million and the two Foundations want to remove them from the gallery in order to sell them for profit. For many, it seems to make obvious and natural sense that, because art galleries hold far more art in their vaults than they can exhibit, and they are always strapped for cash to operate, they should sell a few old paintings for big bucks. While there are unique considerations in the case of the Beaverbrook Art Gallery's collection, it is the monetary focus of the dispute that serves as a sterling example of the issues public art collections and galleries are facing across Canada. The impressive monetary value of the art works and the ease with which it seems possible to sell them off have supplanted the core reason why public collections exist — for the public good.[4]

Major changes in social and political discourses since the 1980s have resulted in the privatization of public culture, the loss of public funding and the reorientation of public institutions to a private sector model. The rationale for public collections was developed under an earlier policy environment whereby it was possible to base public collections on the goal of preserving art works in the interest of the general population and above private matters or individual concerns. The components of former liberal discourses that supported this goal, such as arms-length governance and "the public good," are now seen as out-moded and delegitimized concepts. For public art galleries, the result is that arts professionals now regularly deploy business discourses as part of operating these public institutions and accept this as an inevitable fact in our policy landscape. By doing so, galleries accept that these discourses are relevant to public institutions and also accept the associated standards of measurement and debate.

Since taking the helm of a major public art collection four years ago, it has become clear to me that discussion of the role these collections play can provide an anchor for resisting the widespread business orientation and pervasive privatization of society. Although times have changed and discourses have shifted, public art collections are still here, acting more like big, expensive poltergeists than ghosts of older liberal philosophy; they are too tangible to be ignored with their ever present demand for space and resources.

The set of problems putting pressure on art galleries and public art collections is of course much larger than the gallery world. That said, the same movement to disband the welfare state and make the caretaking of people a private matter, has similarly forced the caretaking of culture out of the public realm. Galleries are expected to increase revenue from private donors and corporations in addition to generating revenue from activities such as charging admission or renting out facilities. Enmeshed in this shift are specific ideas such as the decreased authority of expertise, the elevation of the individual tax payer's voice and the replacement of arms-length approaches to governance with emphasis on concepts of numerical accountability.

These are not superficial shifts. The changes in discourse alter the very terms of discussion and the standards by which success is measured. As Rose succinctly explains, "It is these problematizations that accord the activity of politics its intelligibility and possibility at different times; it is these problematizations that shape what are to be counted as problems, what as failures and what as solutions."[5] For art galleries, these shifts have meant that our institutions have moved from being part of the solution to being a problem and failure. In the Beaverbrook dispute, this shift means that it now seems perfectly reasonable to sell two important paintings rather than keep them in

Art vault storage facility, University of Lethbridge, Courtesy: Josephine Mills

perpetuity so that current and future citizens can view, learn from and enjoy them.

The notion of public good placed art galleries in the important and valuable role of contributors to public education and preservers of history and culture. Art Galleries have worked at raising the standard of education for the entire population and creating a sense of regional or national pride in culture. Under current assumptions, we are relegated to the margins as expensive and frivolous and placed on the defensive, justifying our existence in relation to a system of measurement that will always find us lacking. Under these terms, it is the fault of arts professionals if we cannot increase revenue every year or if we have difficulty with sky rocketing insurance costs on the art collections we manage and preserve. Entangled in this set of problems, and with the loss of authority accorded to expertise, arts professionals no longer have the legitimacy necessary to effectively argue our position and support the role of art galleries.

Responding to the massive public funding cuts of the 1990s, art galleries have done extremely well. For several years, galleries across Canada have raised the percentage of non-public funding in our budgets, continued to produce strong exhibitions and maintained art collections. In recent years, public galleries on average hit a plateau and thus have maintained the same level of non-public support.[6] This should be seen as a success — galleries rose to the challenge of losing public funds and have stabilized their budgets with some replacement income. Quite the contrary, according to business logic we should ever increase our revenue. Other than the obvious point that galleries are not businesses and therefore revenue is not our primary activity, why else would the majority of art galleries in this country have hit a ceiling in terms of the percentage of their budget they can raise from non-public funds? One answer lies in looking not at galleries, but at the policy framework that exists in Canada.

Focusing on art galleries is too narrow a range of examination. If one steps back and explores the larger context that provides the base for both public and private funding, it becomes clear why Canadian art galleries are stuck at the same level of non-public fundraising. The fact is, there are limits to what the private sector will do in this country. As Kevin Dowler details in "The Cultural Industries Policy Apparatus," Canada is characterized by "the weakness of private capital," the key reason for the development of state funding for culture.[7] Dowler bases his discussion on arguments that supported the Massey Commission's findings and lead to the public funding system still in existence. With public funding in place — which was heartily encouraged by the private sector during the founding of these institutions — corporations and wealthy individuals do not need to support culture. The reality of today's situation is that art galleries are caught between decreased public funding and the continued reluctance of the private sector to increase their level of support. In addition, the art market for certain kinds of art in Canadian collections has become "hot" with the value of works rising dramatically. The same paintings that have been in public collections for decades are suddenly worth considerably more than previously imagined. Following business logic, as is seen in the Beaverbrook dispute, a solution to the problem of stressed art gallery operating budgets is to sell off a few high-priced paintings.

Chris Cran, *Self-portrait accepting a cheque for the commission of this painting*, 1988, oil on canvas, University of Lethbridge Art Collection, Courtesy: Josephine Mills

Deaccessionning has been part of public gallery practices since the origin of these institutions as a rare occurrence motivated by maintaining the collection rather than raising revenue. Since the formation of the modern art gallery, control over deaccessioning and adherence to ethical standards have been supported by the authority of professional expertise. Summing up the underlying logic to this practice, Donald Garfield states that public galleries can,

> sell and exchange works of art in order to refine and enhance the collections. This approach [...] is founded on the concept that the [gallery's] goal must be excellence as defined by the best scholarly advice it can obtain. What the [gallery] sells or exchanges and what it acquires is based on the judgment and recommendations of professional curators and scholars who spend their lives in the study, analysis, appreciation and evaluation of works of art.[8]

With the shift away from liberal discourses, Garfield's description of professionally acceptable deaccessioning sounds arrogant and out of touch. Within the last decade, concepts such as "excellence" and practices in which scholars have the final word have been delegitimized and called elitist. The combination of this change with the increasingly attractive lure of auction prices for Canadian landscapes and other works creates a hazardous combination for public art collections.

Jin-me Yoon, *Souvenirs of the Self* (detail), 1991-2001, C-print, University of Lethbridge Art Collection, Courtesy: Josephine Mills

The changes in liberal discourses and their relationship to art galleries and public collections is evident in those concepts that have lost authority and those that have risen in prominence. Notions of accountability to the taxpayer, where the opinion of every citizen is equal to that of a scholar or expert, are clearly visible in debates such as those that resulted in funding cuts to arts and education. During the infamous National Gallery of Canada controversies of the early 1990s over the acquisition of works by Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko as well as the exhibition of Jana Sterbak's "Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorexic," the arts professionals who supported these decisions suddenly found their knowledge and experience discounted. In the flurry of media coverage, curators and art historians claims were dismissed while the opinion of the supposedly average person on the street concerning a big striped abstract painting (or a blurry one) and a dress made of rotting meat were elevated. In the NGC disputes, the focus was on tax dollars — the price tag for those abstract paintings and an artist's bill at the butcher shop.

In the aftermath of these events and others like them, the role played by numbers in supplanting the authority of experts as a key component of governmental activity is less obvious. Numbers might seem innocuous in these major discursive shifts, but when the authority of the arms-length process is secure, and the word of an expert is sufficient to justify the activities of the institution in which they work, then experts do not need numbers to fight off challenges and prove they meet standards of accountability. For the arts, numbers have taken on a new and clearly important role in areas such as grant applications. Galleries must now accurately track attendance figures and many other statistics to report to their various funding bodies. Exact counting of how many come through the door or how many artworks toured the region has become crucial to backing up claims of success by an institution and thus its merit for receiving financial support.

Public collections and the associated spectre of deaccessioning is an area where numbers are key. In the Beaverbrook dispute, newspaper items and the people speaking on behalf of the Foundations repeatedly boil the issue down to numbers. In addition to the oft quoted $30 million value of the Turner and the Freud combined, other regularly cited figures are that Fredericton is a city of 48,000 and that there are about 175 artworks worth tens of millions of dollars at stake. The use of numbers to define opposition to the art gallery's position is clear in an article in the *National Post*, which includes an interview with Foundation supporter Vincent Prager: "Another of the gallery's problems is that it only draws some 20,000 people a year, a pitiful number, Prager said. 'These are pictures of such incredible prominence that they need to be seen by the world.'"[9] Backing up this argument, the article states that "One small picture with a value of more than $2 million has never been shown once, according to Prager, but has been left to sit in the vault since the gallery opened."[10] How shocking!

Lost in the need to counter negative numbers with those that support art galleries is the simple truth that numbers are no more inherently objective than the experts and scholars Garfield discusses. The positioning of either numbers or experts as authorities is embedded in and made possible by specific discourses. The arms-length structure of arts funding and public gallery operation was created when earlier strategies of liberal rule empowered this form of governance and now, the for-profit models and their associated discourses have produced a context that instead empowers the use of figures as part of asserting the importance of (supposedly) objective measures of accountability. In this way, Garfield's assumptions are based on a system that sanctioned select types of experts to act at arms-length on behalf of government.[11] Numbers are part of the set of concepts that replaced the governmental power of experts and rendered Garfield's approach invalid.

The association of numbers with provincial and federal grants supports Rose's key point that "Numbers have achieved an unmistakable political power within technologies of government." The implication is that "numbers determine who holds power, and whose claim to power is justified."[12] Furthermore, the relationship between numbers and politics is reciprocal and as such "it is not just that the domain of numbers is politically composed, but also that the domain of politics is made up numerically."[13] Significant in the power of numbers is that their use as a government technology acts to depoliticise their role. Numbers appear to be above politics or social issues. Because they are assumed to be simple facts, the best way to counter them seems to be by using other numbers and thereby striving for the same level of objectivity.

The problem with numbers and the politics of their use was made clear to me when I arrived at the University

of Lethbridge. While it was refreshing to find that the University's Art Collection was well known on campus and in the community, I soon found that its significance was solely defined by two main figures: the estimated total value of the works in the collection and the numbers of works held.[14] The University listed these figures in every mention of the collection and relied on them as the sole explanation for the importance of their holding of art works. Not surprisingly, I also found that the topic of deaccessioning frequently came up at budget talks and with members of the community. But defining the collection as an item worth millions of dollars reduces the individual art work's value to a financial measure. In this way, it becomes logical to ask, if one wants to fundraise for a new building or increase an operating budget, why not just sell some of the art to raise the necessary funds?

The stakes involved in using numbers to support the significance of the art collection became most apparent to me as I tried to counter this approach. Four years later, I have made headway, but still not won, this battle. Although now supplemented by other information, the monetary value continues to show up in university promotional materials and is raised by many on and off campus when the collection comes up in conversation. It is not just that the numbers are easier to use or "sexier" than other options such as identifying the diversity of the collection or the role we play in research. Using the big numbers refutes the cultural value of the collection and dismisses the importance of the critical practice of artists like Joyce Wieland or Jin-Me Yoon whose works do not have the monetary value of those by A. Y. Jackson or Pablo Picasso. The numbers approach denies why an institution like the University of Lethbridge should and does collect in the first place: for the preservation and documentation of cultural items for current and future generations.

Trying to go along with the approach by coming up with counter-figures to challenge those that attack gallery practices is a task for Sisyphus. One can win an individual debate, such as pointing out that attendance of 20,000 for the Beaverbrook Art Gallery in a city of 45,000 is an excellent percentage for any type of venue, particularly so for an art gallery. However, it will not alter the terms of a discussion that place galleries in the defensive position of having to justify our existence and practices on an almost daily basis. The consistency of balanced budgets among art galleries in the face of public funding cuts have earned us little to no attention. Not surprisingly, these numbers do not speak for themselves, nor do strong attendance figures.
The impossibility of ever succeeding by the rules laid out by business logic and privatizing discourses is readily apparent in the pressures on public art collections. The stakes are high indeed for this component of art gallery practice because if works are sold off to pay utility bills, they are gone from public hands and will likely never be recovered. There is a reason galleries are allowed to issue tax receipts for 100 percent of the value of art donated to public collections. Gifting the same work of art to WestJet will do nothing come tax time.

So, why should a public art gallery create and be answerable to a "business plan" as our granting agencies now require? In the context of increasingly used and accepted privatizing discourse, it is crucial to question seemingly objective ways to make art professionals approach their work.

Public art collections not only make the interplay of old and new discourses visible, they stand testament to the fact that concern for the public good is not dead. Public collections do in fact manage to exist even though the forces of the new economy work to dismiss their value. Art collections are still here and attention to their role points out that the popularity of business terms and approaches is a trend and, like all trends, it will pass. Maintaining the productive aspects of public good and thereby resisting the raiding of public art collections for short-sighted financial gain is part of critical activity that assists in diminishing the long term effects of the privatizing trend. In this way, analysis of the Beaverbrook situation and other public art collections provides a route for examining how old and new government discourses interact in the specific area of the arts in Canada. This focus emphasises the need to refuse the terms currently being forced on art professionals to define and legitimate our work. Without this attention, more controversies like the Beaverbrook's are sure to appear and opposing the pressure to deaccession according to business frameworks will be increasingly difficult.

Acknowledgments:
I would like to thank Leila Armstrong, Carol Williams and the Cultural Studies group at the University of Lethbridge for feedback on this article, as well as Siri Kramps for research assistance, and acknowledge the financial support of the University of Lethbridge Research Fund.

Josephine Mills is the Director/Curator of the University of Lethbridge Art Gallery and an assistant professor in the department of art. She has worked as a curator and public programmer in art galleries and artist-run centres in Saskatoon and Vancouver. Mills has a PhD in communication studies from Concordia University. Her research interests focus on broader issues related to collecting for art galleries and for artists as well as on the relationship between art and notions of public in Canada.

Notes:

1. Nikolas Rose, "Government, authority and expertise in advanced liberalism," *Economy and Society* 22:3 (1993), p. 286.
2. *Entertainment Weekly* #802 (21 January 2005), p. 22. "People lie. Numbers don't" is the tag line in an ad for *NUMB3RS*, a new drama on CBS.
3. Canadian born, but living in Britain for his business and political career, the first Lord Beaverbrook set up a foundation in each of these countries in addition to founding the New Brunswick art gallery and the core of its collection.
4. The idea of the public good is not unproblematic given that modern public art galleries were founded on the historic assumption that the ruling class knows what is best for the working masses and the goal of using these institutions for "civilising" and inculcating bourgeois values in those who attend them. These institutions do, however, preserve cultural heritage, maintain resources for research and can transcend social and political trends in doing so.
5. Rose, p. 285.
6. I base this claim on discussions amongst Canadian Art Museum Directors of Canada members at our regular meetings. We have repeatedly discussed this issue and identified both the initial success in dealing with major changes in our funding framework as well as this plateau.
7. Kevin Dowler, "The Cultural Industries Policy Apparatus," in Michael Dorland, ed., *The Cultural Industries in Canada: Problems, Policies and Prospects* (Toronto: James Lorimer & Company, Publishers, 1996), pp. 328-346.
8. Donald Garfield, "Deaccessioning Goes Public,"in Stephen E. Weil, ed., *A Deaccessioning Reader* (Washington DC: American Association of Museums, 1997), p. 16.
9. Charles Mandel, "The battle for Lord Beaverbrook's art collection," *National Post* (3 April 2004), p. RB5.
10. *ibid.*
11. The select part is important as there are clearly elitist notions underlying which types of experts are acceptable and which are not — and thus an art connoisseur fits this framework.
12. Nikolas Rose, *Powers of Freedom: reframing political thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 197.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 198.
14. The University of Lethbridge collection was also defined by possession of works by artists with recognisable names, particularly Picasso and Warhol. I am sure that the well known monetary value of work by these artists contributed to their use in defining the significance of the collection.

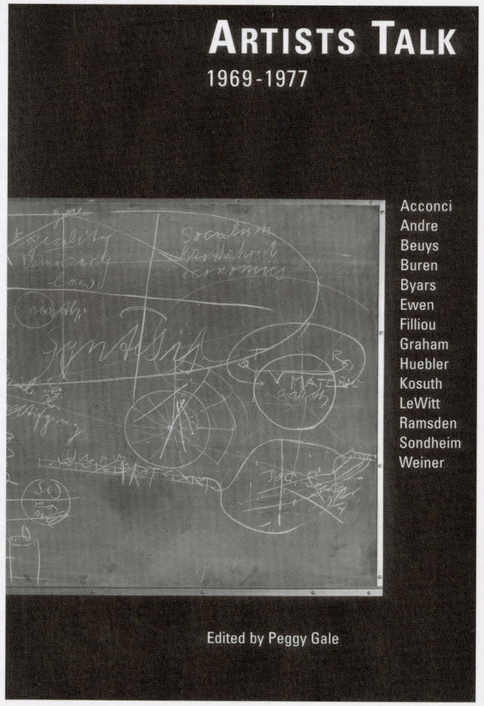
A Hotbed of Hotheads

Artists Talk 1969–1977
Edited by Peggy Gale
NSCAD University Press: 2005

review by Sally McKay

My alma matter, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD) has just reignited their press. The first book is a collection of artists' talks from the 1970s. Several things pop out as soon as you pick up the book: most of the speakers are quite famous, most could be called conceptual artists. Only one of them is Canadian; all of them are men. Editor Peggy Gale is both rigorous and brilliant and I must confess I trust her judgement. But why publish such a seemingly politically incorrect tome? Gale sees herself first and foremost as a historian, and this book is truly a slice of the past. As her introduction states, "At that time [the early 1970s] only four of the forty-three faculty members were female, though the student body of 379 was almost evenly split … Similarly, most visiting artists were male, a reflection of the international art scene." NSCAD president Garry Neill Kennedy, along with colleagues such as Gerald Ferguson and David Askevold, used their art-world connections to draw an impressive list of international visitors. Discussions were free-ranging, and fractious. The college developed a reputation as a theoretical hotbed of contemporary discourse, a legacy that remained when I attended ten to fifteen years later in the mid-'80s.

Many of the issues raised by '70s conceptual art are still in play today: debunking the myth of the genius, the strategic positioning of art as commodity, the possibilities and impossibilities for the political function of art, the artist as theoretician, investment in social networks and shared communication rather than an avant-garde spearheaded by representatives. In *Artists Talk*, we hear these ideas fresh from the horses' mouths. These guys were really letting go of the art object for the first time in history — charting new abstract territory — and the excitement is palpable. This time-travel experience is also



alarming, however, as most of the artists speak with an unquestioned entitlement and machismo that would be outrageous in a contemporary context. We are accustomed to expressions of humility and doubt in artists' talks nowadays, and we are particularly used to white male artists making their public deliveries in a self-effacing mode. Lawrence Weiner's talk from 1972 is exemplary in its brash style and abrasive political stance. "[Women's liberationists] have cause with liberated women, and liberated women are, by definition, middle-class women. They are not at all interested in lower-class women because the problems are too complex, and they're not at all interested in interpersonal relationships — they are interested in liberating. […] The word 'liberation' is about the most fucking, ugly word that human beings have devised because it means you are above and are willing to stoop down, like a good Christian, and lift these other people up to your level."

Weiner lashes out several times in this manner, demonstrating a class rage that I would never previously have ascribed to him. As with many of these speakers he is unmitigating and relentless. The discussions, while unstructured and open are often confrontational, and both students and faculty seem up for a fight. At the same time, many of these artists express the ideal of removing ego from artwork. Daniel Buren states clearly that his art is not his property. Joseph Kosuth says that he wants to "get away from this idea of individualism," and that "no particular work should be a masterpiece." Robert Filliou says he is "against the idea of admiration." Even the demonically self-empowered Vito Acconci states, "…by doing those activities that closed myself up in myself, I was really making myself some kind of separate object. So rather than making myself a 'person,' I was making myself a kind of image. I was separating myself from the viewer, so it seemed to me that if there was going to be any notion of person, there would have to be some notion of inter-person, person with person, rather than the enclosure, the object quality."

Embedded in the testosterone on these pages is a delicate analytical proposition that ideas themselves have a shape and provide a shared experience. Sol LeWitt, whose works are a geometric filigree of grids and empty space, compares his method — mechanically following a predetermined set of instructions — to reading a score of Bach while listening to his music, "…you could find out that he's doing all sorts of things in the score that you can't hear as sound. He has all these little systems of his own working, where he's working them out like abstract possibilities, and what comes out is this music which sounds to some people really great and to some people not so great. […] The point is if you read the score and you saw all the intricacies of it, I think it would probably help. It wouldn't make the work sound one bit better but you'd know his mind. You'd be getting a message from his mind to your mind through the vehicle of his music."

All of these speakers are artists, not critics, and yet they are unselfconscious in their pursuit of theoretical structure. Dan Graham, who may be possessed of one of the most unique minds alive, weaves a thread connecting art bands, punk rock, Russian formalism and Bertold Brecht in a comparison between propaganda and classical realism, concluding with the dangers of ascribing the term "natural" to ideological norms. Joseph Beuys pours forth hours worth of cultural criticism, "Nobody today can be a believer. Everybody has in principle to be a 'knower,' yes, a scientist; he has to shake, has to control, has to measure, to erase and so on and so on."

I attended NSCAD between 1985 and 1990. Garry Neill Kennedy was still president, Gerald Ferguson was still grumpy and theory still ruled the day. It was no longer a man's world, however, and there were plenty of tough smart women on staff such as Suzanne Funnell, Jan Peacock and Suzanne Gauthier. Postmodernism was in full swing, and tensions ran high. There were teachers' strikes. Faculty were pitted against administration. New guard was pitted against old guard, passion against irony, content against commodity. Students were pulled into allegiances, and asked to "side" with one faction or another. It was fascinating and stressful. On more than one occasion I was informed that I was making "the wrong kind of art for a woman." I remember one friend in particular taking me aside and informing me, with a missionary insistence, that I "had to learn" that men and women "make art differently." At the time I was bullishly irritated, and dug in my heels, making clunky, heavily ironic oil paintings of hockey cards and scenes drawn from the Canadian Tire catalogue.

Reading *Artists Talk* was an experience akin to digging through old family letters, and rediscovering a disturbing ancestral lineage. How is it that I identify so strongly with all of these aggressive men? When I was a student, I did not consider feminism to be "my cause." I refused the notion that conceptual art was not for girls, but I did not deeply consider it. Like many young women, I felt I was entitled to reap the social benefits sewn by the strident bra-burners. It is only now, looking back, that I clearly see the political nature of gender segregation at my school. I realize that I have been privileged in my entitlement to conceptual art. I have not been put off by the lack of women in this recent history, but instead have calmly claimed it as my own. I have, indeed, been helping myself to the benefits of hard-fought feminism. Perhaps this attitude of mine came across to other women of the '80s as a betrayal of the sisterhood. I would never agree that women must make a certain kind of art, but I have somewhat more empathy now for those who clung to this particular essentialism.

Now I am a mid-thirties artist/writer and, while I identify myself as a feminist, I have rarely said so publicly, nor made the term an explicit focus of my work. I worry that in my silence on the issue, I have been letting down younger generations, for many of whom the term "feminism" has come to be associated with something old, ugly and boring. *The Toronto Star* recently published a scathing review by Lynn Crosbie of Judy Rebick's book, *Ten Thousand Roses: The Making of a Feminist Revolution* where she notes that old-guard feminism has "become as dull as dishwater." True, perhaps, but I am disturbed that Crosbie holds up Camille Paglia and Courtney Love as alternatives.

Now, I've put in my share of hours playing Tomb Raider with the fabulously fearless Lara Croft. And I've watched in admiration as Buffy slaughtered monsters with her awesome powers. But these millennial female icons, while physically strong and sexually attractive, are also inarticulate girlish, and confused. Better role models are my female friends and colleagues, who are fierce in protecting their own intellectual space, demand priority for their own life's work and pursue their ideas with enthusiasm and rigour. I also see that it remains a struggle. Many women still hesitate to expose their intelligence, struggle for permission to pursue an unmitigated train of thought and must overcome great existential fear before they can present the fruits of their intellect with passion.

When I read *Artists Talk,* I note the intellectual aggression and bravado that these male artists emanate, the thrill of passionate and competitive debate. I note the pure pleasure in discussing with precision the nature and structure of thought, the joy to be had in sharing art as an analytical experience. I note the idealism, and the genuine belief in the possibility of a better society. I note that everyone in this book is a man. But that was then, this is now, and clompy-booted, short-waisted, blow-hard, grown-up feminist-in-the-year-2005 that I am, I claim my right to *all* the fruits of our cultural legacy. *Artists Talk* presents a fascinating slice of history that belongs to everyone who wants it.

Sally McKay is an artist and writer. She is currently working on an art project about neutrinos, quantum theory and other nerdish topics. She writes art essays and reviews for various publications, a column on art and science for Kiss Machine *and maintains an active weblog on "Toronto art and other stuff." Sally was co-owner/editor of the Toronto magazine* Lola.

Where is the *Flipside?*

Flipside
Artist Space, New York
12 November 2004 – 8 January 2005

review by Mira Friedlaender

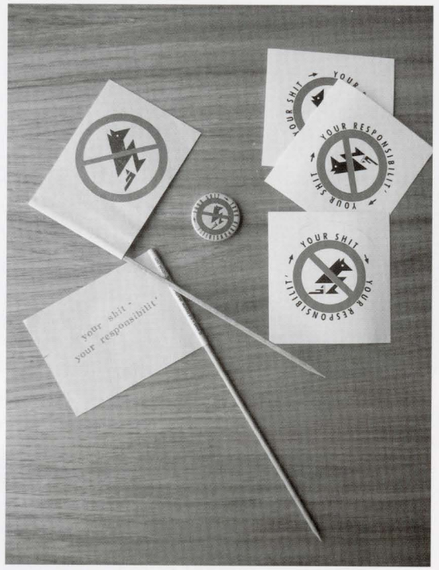
What is the flipside of a utopian project, and what happens to art when our utopian projects collapse? Curated by Katherine Carl, the *Flipside* exhibition attempts to "traverse the horizon of separate utopian totalities of East and West."[1] The works of the thirty-two Eastern European and US-based artists on view were culled from the alumni lists of more than a decade's work in artistic exchanges and residencies supported by Artslink and the Soros Centers for Contemporary Art. As a result, the show covers so much ground it tends toward chaos. It succeeds, however, in shedding light on a worthy program and artists little known outside their home countries. Works in the show that look back at the ruins of their Soviet past often do so with dark humour and aplomb.

"Flipside," installation view, Courtesy: Katherine Carl

With a project this grand, curation is a Herculean task bound to miss some notes. The works range from the didactic to the sublime, with the main gallery having showcased mostly photography and sculpture while three side rooms showed video programs and installations. It is noteworthy that the two paintings included, Jaroslaw Flicinski's *Faites vos Jeux, #45* (2002) and Odili Donald Odita's *Transitory Dwelling* (2004), are decidedly abstract, suggesting a hangover from the impact of socialist realism on painting and a mistrust of any art that had sanction in the "official" days. The strengths of the show reside in the photography, video and sculpture — a turn toward conceptualism that is highly critical.

Works on paper such as Aleksandar Zograf's *Regards from USA* (1999) and skart's *Your shit, Your responsibility* (2000), are married firmly to the graphic traditions of street protest and comix, with a connection to samizdat[2] that is not lost on this reviewer. Zograf's comic strip functions as a letter home, candidly conveying the artist's experience of American culture as not being entirely superior to his homeland, "rotten old Serbia." This example of citizen diplomacy fits the mission of Artslink neatly, while Zograf's view makes it clear the grass isn't greener on either side.

Belgrade-based skart's *Your Shit, Your Responsibility* (2000), on the other hand, uses the bold and direct design tools of street protest to an indirect purpose. Pins and stickers printed with the slogan "*Your Shit, Your Responsibility,*" can be worn or applied to the streetscape, commenting on everything from imperialism or the environment to personal problems. The statement is so open in its criticism that it becomes neutered. Though the work is described as a tool to spark discussion, like so many ambiguous ad campaigns it may



Skart, *Your Shit, Your Responsibility,* stickers, buttons, wood and paper flags, 2000, Courtesy: Katherine Carl

only serve to generate discussion about itself and its creators.

In the video *Women at Work — washing up* (2001) Sarajevan artist Maja Bajevic and three women displaced by the massacre in Srebrenica perform what appears to be an inverted fairy tale. The more they wash the sheets embroidered with Marshall Tito's slogans of brotherhood, the blacker and more tattered the sheets become. It is a beautiful idea but somewhat heavy handed in execution. The work scrutinizes the shattered dream of Yugoslavia and reflects on Tito's powerful hand of 'socialist brotherhood' that suppressed dissent and difference. As they wash the words, the fabric disintegrates much as the former Yugoslavia has done.

Another vision of life after armed conflict shows up in the work of American artist Charles Krafft's *Thompson Assault Rifle* (2002) and *Fragment Grenade* (2004), rendered in Delftware porcelain. The pieces lay in their vitrine as inert portraits of the tools of war and insurrection. Their delicate glazed patterns connote a moment beyond need, when weapons might become ornaments in a more peaceful reality. This mythic moment must exist in the future, yet it is presented to us in an archaic medium, pressing together the fictions of past and future. While it is one of the few works in the show that bear the direct mark of the artist's hand, Krafft's work rides the edge of a kitschy "swords into ploughshares" dream, a sliver of the utopian still extant.

In discussing these works in the context of utopia, it is important to consider the long shadow of socialist realism, with its project of a "…utopian enthusiasm over a future that was seen to have been already realized…[compressing] the gap between the present and the future."[3] Such a project leaves no space for the realities

Charles Krafft, *Fragment Grenades,* porcelain, 2004, Courtesy: Katherine Carl

Audrius Stonys, *Alone,* film still, 2001, Courtesy: Katherine Carl

that occupy the present. One such reality is delicately addressed in Lithuanian filmmaker Audrius Stonys' piece *Alone* (2001). The film presents what seems to be a beautiful, melancholy narrative about a girl travelling alone by car to an unknown destination. The piece is striking in the way the filmmaker and soundman repeatedly break the frame. Misty closeups give way to a documentary style shot of the filmmaker setting up scenes in the car, out of sync with the main body of the film, leading ultimately to a prison where the girl visits a woman. The trope of cinema, which tells us the girl is alone and what we are watching is fiction, is completely broken by these interludes. Knocking the viewer out of reverie, Stonys hints to content not made explicit in the film; this is a documentary of the artist's father's volunteer work driving children to visit their mothers in prison. Works like this one, that break the frame of their own media come closest to revealing an answer to the curator's thesis. If anything a post-utopian art might awaken critical inquiry — just what is going on here, are all our fictions truth and vice versa?

Reflecting on what *has* been going on, Pravdoliub Ivanov's *Pessimism No More* (2002), channels socialist optimism while presenting the viewer with a humorous and poignant attempt to "repair" a block of Swiss cheese placed on a country kitchen table. The holes in the cheese have been carefully bandaged and filled with gauze, an attempt to make it "whole" again, into something it never was. This may be the clearest statement of the socialist-utopian project, overly ambitious and colouring the way citizens see the world and its meaning. A cheese with holes is not sufficiently Soviet; the holes are pessimistic! This work successfully conveys the bittersweet utopian project from the "other side" of ideology. The humour of the "repair attempt" reveals the self-conscious perfectionism of propagandas past, group-think that coloured a citizen's experience of every object in the world — seeking to repair and perfect all.

One work interrogated the socialist past by tracing the myth of Lenin, Anthony and Katya Pemberton's documentary *The children met Lenin in the spring* (2004), presenting the memories of children, young adults and a Lenin impersonator. A group of boys describe Lenin as a man with superhuman qualities, followed by accounts of seeing his mummy wink during a visit to the Lenin mausoleum. Young women sing Communist Party songs that seem to come from the mythic past. The humorous, almost nostalgic result confirms the cult of Lenin not only persists in the cultural memory but also continues to mutate even as capitalism becomes the norm.

The flipside Katherine Carl speaks of — the mutations of capitalist-utopian dreams — is difficult to find in the works of the US-based artists in the show. It is however clearly referenced in the photo-series *Foxy Mister* (2002) by performance artist Tomislav Gotovac. The photos present the artist's own sixty-something body in the sexually available poses of a young woman in a pornography spread. Taking the position of the sexual object, Gotovac puts his own body on the market but not without a knowing wink to the viewer. The plush shag carpets and rich colour mats present soft-porn kitsch in a cheerful, straightforward fashion. Embracing the absurdity of the scenario and the cruelty of the market, the photos challenge the viewer humorously. The work presents the artist as consumable, successfully reflecting the reigning commercialism of the international art market. Is this the ultimate answer to what post-utopian art looks like: hairy, glossy and ready to sell?

This question is not addressed in the works of established American artists, such as Joan Jonas and Tony Oursler, which seem a bit out of place either as an excerpt from a larger work (Jonas) or a Polish-speaking version of the ubiquitous (if excellent) Oursler "doll-under-a-table" video series. Indeed, it has been argued that "… American art is part of an international art scene, in which it is no longer expected that art should display the attributes of a national identity."[4] This can

Milena Dopitová, *Everything I want you may wish too*
black and white photograph, 2002–2004, Courtesy: Katherine Carl

also apply to visible ideology. Julia Kunin's *Ruby Octopi* (2001) stand out for their primarily optical quality which detracts from the curator's investigation of utopia. More pervasive is the ideology of the international art market, a gallery-ready gloss that we perceive as professionalism. The direct, often didactic, approach of artists from other participant countries sticks out and gives the viewer something to hold onto, for better or worse. Emese Benczur's *Get Far* (2003), a wall work spelling out its title in LED trinkets, conductive tape, pipe cleaners and electricity, shows the hand of the artist if only in the painstaking assembly of basic electronic components. It's a wonder that it functions at all with its bare-bones construction, a fragility and ingenuity that certainly could be seen to reflect the pragmatic reconstruction of newly independent Eastern Bloc countries. Adhered directly to the wall, and clearly conducting electricity, the effect is flash and cheap but intelligently contradictory. The work points to a future, an action that will need more than pipe cleaners and cheap flashing lights, but urges us on anyway.

A more cautious message may be found in Milena Dopitova's photographs of elderly Prague residents walking their dogs, *Everything I want you may wish too* (2002–2004). The solitary owners may speak through the title, while the large black and white photos bear down on the viewer with the austere loneliness and lost dreams of those who were once young. The utopian plans of the last century had many individual champions, often left behind or betrayed, and although this generation may be more cynical, the cycle of activist-dream, cooption and dissolution continues.

The collapse of utopian projects, seen from this side of the Atlantic, could be framed more accurately as the export of our market values, something most US artists in the show don't seem invested in critiquing. The dearth of direct political art to be seen in New York galleries today may be the flipside of the post-utopian dream, American-style. Indeed, before the fall of the Berlin wall, artist Bridget Riley wrote that "the Western World will produce an inversion of the effect of totalitarianism, with commercialism replacing party ideology as the dominant factor"[5] What the effect on art will be is open to debate, but the artists included in the show and around the world are moving on. They are participating in the art world, the art market, which may, following Arthur Danto's assertion, inevitably apply a gloss of invisibility to their local origins. In the era 'after' official art, the myths of socialist utopia or capitalist materialism become twined and tangled. The ideology that permeates our own culture is often invisible to us but plain to those from outside, one fabulous reason to continue to encourage citizen diplomacy and artistic exchange, utopia or no.

Mira Friedlaender is an artist working primarily with performance for video and works on paper. She is old enough to remember Mutually Assured Destruction and received her MFA in visual art from New York University. She lives and works in Brooklyn NY.

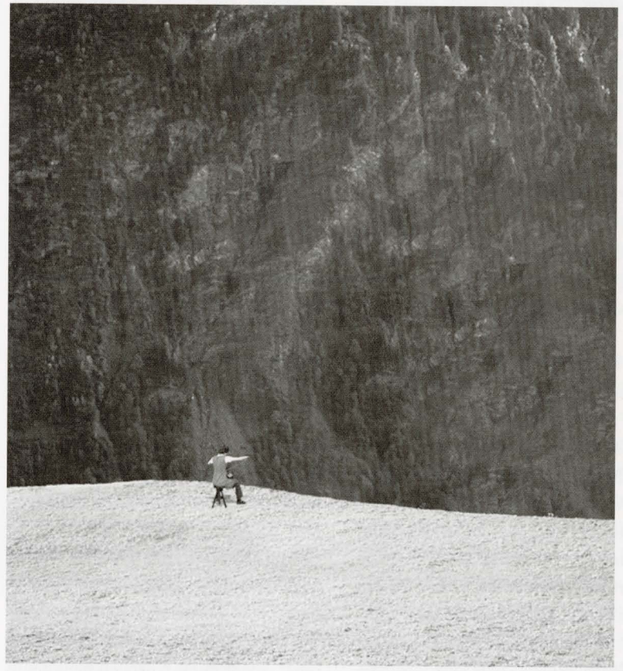
Notes:

1. *Flipside press release,* 12 November 2004 – 8 January 2005, Artists Space, New York NY.
2. Soviet-era underground press.
3. Gleb Prokhorov, *Art under Socialist Realism* (Craftsman House, 1995), p.30.
4. Arthur C. Danto, *American self-consciousness in politics and art,* http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0268/is_1_43/ai_n7069050/print .
5. Bridget Riley, *The Illustrated London News,* 1983: as quoted in http://www.minusspace.com/finklea/finklea.html#interview.

The Irony of *Aural Cultures*: the Sound of Regular Art

Aural Cultures
Edited by Jim Drobnick
YYZ Books, Toronto: 2004

review by Lis van Berkel



Su-Mei Tse, *Echo* video still, 2003, Courtesy: Su-Mei Tse and Fondation Musée d'Art Moderne Grand-Duc Jean

Lately, I've been exercising my senses. A friend of a friend organizes workshops on the five senses, and I go to Smell. Acquaintances host colour-themed potlucks: a purple dinner one month; only white food the next. I read Patrick Suskind's novel, *Perfume*. Reporters reveal that the Canadian military experimented with stink-bombs in the 1940s. And now, as the snow recedes, I encounter the familiar smell of melting dogshit. Our senses are *on* all day long and regardless of our desire to use them, they continually feed our imaginations.

Jim Drobnick, editor of *Aural Cultures*, has a thing for the senses. He is co-curator of reminiscent, part of FIVE HOLES, an ongoing Fado Performance series on the five senses in Montreal. And now he is editor of seventeen essays on the theme of culture and sound, all written by academics. They cover wide territory: countertenors to gangsta film, Helen Keller to Tibetan Buddhism. Nearly half the articles are by Canadian writers, most of them based in Montreal.

Some are a dense read. Richard Leppert's "The Social Discipline of Listening," a philosophical essay on social codes, concerts and nineteenth-century English paintings, translated from a French anthology, *Le Concert et Son Public,* gets me wondering if perhaps this is a text just for academics:

> What is it that the early-modern reader "consumed" when he or she "consumed" music? What are the relationships of this consuming to

> the construction of personhood; that is, to identity? What is the function of consumption, for the auditor, of the public concert? How ought this consumption be theorized?

But then, if a book about *sound* can't ask abstract questions, what can? Essays like these — for instance, a heavily footnoted piece by audio artist Christof Migone, who here writes about farts in art — just take long to, uh… digest. Like half the writings in *Aural Cultures*, "*Flatus Vocis:* Somatic Winds" is an original essay. In it, Migone points out that critical writing about flatulence is less popular than is writing about scatology. Migone brings together apparently disparate sources: St. Augustine and Aristophanes, early twentieth-century French playwrights Antonin Artaud and Joseph Pujol, absurdists Alfred Jarry and Gertrude Stein, Claude Levi-Strauss and some of Migone's own contemporaries, Julia Loktev and Christian Marclay, whose photography — yes, photography — appears elsewhere in the book.

But I am disappointed with what *Aural Cultures* is not. It is not a book about audio art, despite its 15-track CD insert: the compact disc does not contain any sound pieces, only the audio component of visual work, decontextualized; and most of the essays do not mention audio art. There's little exploration of sound for sound's sake. Like the colours on the trade paperback's cover — a woman dressed in red sitting in a chair on lime-green grass plays a cello into a canyon, a stunning video still from *Echo* by Su-Mei Tse — *Aural Cultures* vibrates with contradiction.

Using the title *Aural Cultures*, Drobnick also subtly, and ironically, allies his book with "oral history" by alluding to a genre of first-person accounts, myths and stories, which this book is mostly not. The anthropologists included in this book, Robert Desjarlais and Charles Hirschkind, explore oral history by recounting the import of conversations about Buddhism in Tibet and Islam in Egypt, conversations that they either overheard or recorded.

Aural Cultures is a book about audio and painting, installation art and literature. It's about van Gogh's passion for Wagner's *Gotterdamerung* and his own hatchet attempt at writing about painting composition as though it were musical composition. It's also about artistic innovation, like that of the first Canadian recipient at the Venice Biennale, audio installation artist Janet Cardiff. And it's about John Cage's soundplay with James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, which itself uses words as sounds.

Aural Cultures only touches briefly on radio and audiobooks, while it alludes to audio art in two essays: Robert Bean writes about Cage's *Roaratorio* and Andra McCartney explores the phenomenon of soundwalks and their impact on her own intriguing microscopic (and microphonic) examination of the topography of a leaf in her artwork. McCartney makes explicit connections between sound and other senses; she identifies early sound recordist Peter Schaeffer's "touching sound" with his fingers as if they were mini-microphones as the precursor to soundwalks by Canadians R. Murray Schaefer and Hildegard Westercamp, while omitting references to more recent work by Cardiff and her partner, George Bures Miller.

One of the compelling Montreal writings — because it is most explicitly about sound art — is by Jennifer Fisher of McGill University on the museum audioguide and critical artwork based on it: Sophie Calle in France, Andrea Fraser in the US, and Cardiff. Fisher writes fluidly about the history of the 1957 "acoustiguide" and its evolution as an artist's tool in the hands of three women questioning curatorial authority.

Two other must-reads are Robert Desjarlais' essay and English professor Georgina Kleege's "Voices in My Head." Both American, both writing personally about a corporeal experience, they are among the most accessible of Drobnick's picks. They also both write about taped human voices, Kleege explicitly as a blind person who uses books-on-tape technology. Kleege is fascinated with people's derision of recordings, which she uses for everything from marking her students' work to editing her own writing. These writers don't use big words to talk about big ideas. They are no less interesting than Fisher or Bean but their writing is more intimate.

Peter Schmunk's essay "What Did Van Gogh Hear?" is an intriguing inclusion on how sound influences artists, even in strange ways: Van Gogh evidently studied piano until his teacher dropped him because he did things like compare cadmium yellow to b-flat. Less strangely, Van Gogh is said to have likened painting to performing music. Schmunk uses letters written by and about the painter to demonstrate his point, but the sociological art criticism left me wanting a deeper comparison of painting to music.

The CD features the audio component of works by thirteen visual artists, among these an excerpt from Tse's video. But Drobnick says little about their work. For instance, he gives over a mere paragraph to the Luxembourg- and Paris-based artist. Another half of the audio pieces are supported just by photographs and brief summaries of the artwork in Drobnick's conclusion. Only one of the artists' works — that of UK-based American artist Susan Hiller — is discussed in the book. This makes the work in *Aural Cultures* less accessible and cohesive than if Drobnick had attempted to deliberately link three disparate media. It's a pleasure, for instance, to read about, see and hear Hiller's *Witness* archive, a sound installation featuring sixty hand-held speakers that transmit stories of abduction circulated on the internet: Drobnick gives us exhibit stills and an interview with the artist, as well as a seven-minute track.

Three other tracks, excerpts of installation work by Spanish artist Santiago Sierra, who uses real people (mostly Mexican) in his artwork, merely suggest through gunshots and banging some of the controversy the art raises. Similarly little context is given other artists: transplanted Newfoundlander Don Simmons of Alberta and Montrealer Kevin Ei-ichi de Forest, whose works don't even merit a photograph; Iranian-American Shirin Neshat, whose 20-minute multi-ethnic soundtrack to her video installation piece *Soliloquy* is by far the longest track; and American Ann Hamilton, whose *speaking the hand's pace* on learning to write is part of a complex multi-media installation, something one does not learn from reading, or looking at, the book.

Conversely, images by experimental DJ Marclay, primarily a sound artist, are given even less context because they go unsupported by sound. Drobnick may be relying on his reader to be familiar enough with Marclay to bring the necessary context. But photographs of four installations by Martin Kersels, a younger, Californian visual artist who uses sound and found objects (like Mac Classics and corrugated metal) are similarly lonely-looking inclusions. Drobnick seems to allude to artists as a way of breaking up three of the five sections of writings, which are loosely organized around heady themes, such as "Acoustic Hegemony and Contestation."

In pointing readers to artists without providing more context, Drobnick operates a kind of scavenger-hunt organizer that drops clues about provocative work to remember. I feel a little like a kid following art-clues filed in between the pages of *Aural Cultures*. This is a book that most people will have to work at to enjoy — especially if they are not academics schooled in several facets of the art world.

Aural Cultures is a useful, and sometimes pleasurable, attempt to draw together ideas about sound. But a CD-ROM replete with moving images and audio from the works in the book would provide more deliberate connections between the words, pictures and sound. I want to *hear* Christian Marclay, not look at his photographs, and to *hear* Christof Migone, not just read him. And, short of actually going to Susan Hiller's exhibit, I want to *see* the spectacle she has created from oral accounts of the paranormal in *Witness*. It all makes good sense.

Lis van Berkel is a Halifax-based writer, radio journalist and sound recordist with a long-standing interest in audio art. She is also a member of the Centre for Art Tapes, where she has been a mentor and curator of audio programming.

On the subject of counting as an advanced skill:

31 March 2005
12 Public galleries across Canada with contemporary art exhibitions

Art Gallery of Calgary

Female artists:	0%	
Male Artists:	100%	Chris Lloyd, Jeff Burgess, Marcus Beil

Art Gallery of Ontario

Female artists:	33%	Kenojuak Ashevak, Jeanne-Claude
Male Artists:	67%	Bruce Mau, Douglas Clark, Kori Newkirk, Christo

Confederation Centre

Female artists:	75%	Hilda Woolnough, Lesley-Anne Bourne, Marlene Creates
Male Artists:	25%	Brian Porter

Contemporary Art Gallery

Female artists:	0%	
Male artists:	100%	Damian Moppett, Zin Taylor

Edmonton Art Gallery

Female artists:	25%	Isabelle Pauwels, Natalija Subotincic
Male Artists:	75%	Alex Morrison, An Te Liu, Brian Jungen, David Janzen, Nestor Kruger, Rodney Graham

Mendel Art Gallery

Female artists:	0%	
Male Artists:	100%	Brian Gladwell, David Hoffos, Ian Rawlinson, Jason Gress

Musee d'art Contemporain Montreal

Female artists:	33%	Cynthia Girard
Male Artists:	67%	Michel Goulet, William Kentridge

National Gallery of Art

Female artists:	0%	
Male Artists:	100%	Brian Jungen, Francis Alys, Geoffrey Farmer, Patterson Ewen

Powerplant Gallery

Female artists:	20%	Jennifer Allora, Kelly Mark, Maura Doyle,
Male Artists:	80%	Andrew Dadson, Dan Graham, Dave Allen, Derek Sullivan, Gabriel Cázares, Guillermo Calzadilla, Jeremy Deller, Jonathan Monk, Julio Castro, Rolando Flores, Tony Romano, Zin Taylor

Saidye Bronfmann Centre

Female artists:	33%	Martha Townsend
Male Artists:	67%	David Merritt, Kai Chan

Vancouver Art Gallery

Female artists:	0%	
Male Artists:	100%	Rodney Graham

Winnipeg Art Gallery

Female artists:	33%	Rita Letendre
Male Artists:	67%	Geoffrey Hendricks, Peter Pitseolak

Summary of galleries

Female artists:	23%
Male Artists:	77%

note: permanent and collection exhibitions not counted

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