

Volume 29 Number 1 \$5.50

ART MEDIA POLITICS

# FUSE

## MAGAZINE

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### In this Issue

**Vera Frenkel** on survival tactics  
**Adrian Blackwell** on  
gentrifying gentrification  
**Kirsten Forkert** on branding  
exhibitions  
**Jessica Wyman** on the public in public  
and ... much more

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3 more issues after this one.

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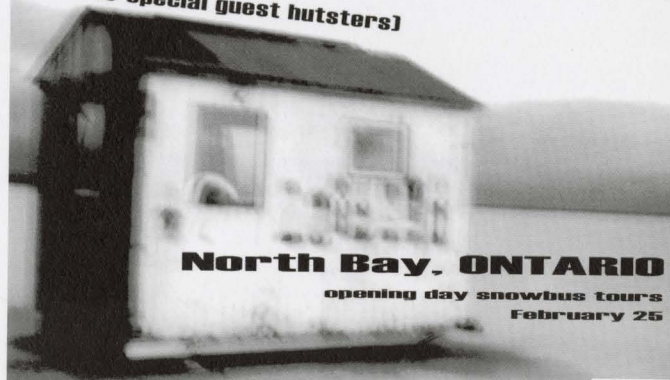
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(& special guest hutsters)



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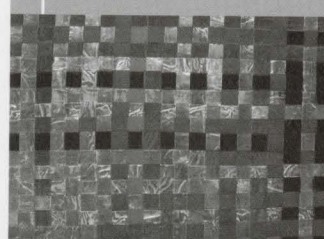


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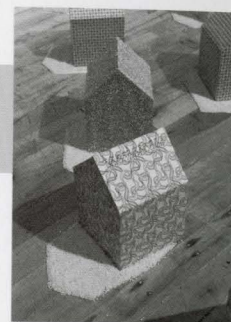


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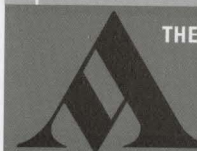


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Image courtesy of Daniel Erban

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Detail, *nowhere*, Melissa Fisher, 2005

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Reception: Thursday, February 23, 5 to 7 pm

*Omnia Vanitas* is the third combined exhibition between OCAD and NSCAD University. This juried exhibit of works from students at both institutions will revolve around the theme that 'all is vanity'. Appropriate, as historically in Western Culture jewellery has been worn to display status, wealth, and power.

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January 20 - March 3

Opening reception 7 PM, January 20

A photographic testament to the ancestral lands of the Dakota  
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moment, the Sacred Feminine and the beauty of the earth mother,  
mother earth.

**Shelly Niro**

**Screening & Reception**

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To celebrate International Women's Day, Mentoring Artists for  
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national and international attention by juxtaposing dark humor  
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have been screened at festivals worldwide, including The Shirt  
(2003) shown at the 2003 Venice Biennale, 2004 Sundance Film  
Festival, and the National Museum of the American Indian.

Urban Shaman will be offering to our members studio visits by Shelly  
Niro. Only four spots available, book your appointments now.

**Robert Houle**

**Nomenclature (Apache Bombs & Helicopters)**

March 17 - April 29

Opening reception 7 PM, March 17

Anishnabe artist Robert Houle examines the naming of helicopters  
and weapons of mass destruction after the Apache, a fiercely  
independent people of the American Southwest.

**Kent Monkman**

**Artist Talk**

2 PM, March 18

Artist talk with up and coming artist, filmmaker Kent Monkman  
from Fisher River, Manitoba.

**Marvin Francis Memorial Gallery**

**Inauguration**

3 PM, March 31

Celebrate the official opening of the Marvin Francis Memorial  
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**Wilfredo Prieto - Mute**

January 19 - February 26, 2006

A site specific exhibition by a rising young Cuban artist whose work was included  
in a recent exhibiton at Toronto's Power Plant, at the last Bienal de La Habana and  
a number of galleries in Europe.

Artist's Talk: Thursday January 19 at 7 pm

**Between History and Memory**

January 8 - February 26, 2006

An exhibition highlighting work from McMaster's collection and private loans by  
twentieth century artists of Latin American origin including Wilfredo Lam, Rufino  
Tamayo, Alfredo Jaar, Dámarys Sepúlveda, Eugenio Tellez, and Roberto Matta.

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January 4 - February 26, 2006

Part of the Curatorial Incubator Series, this exhibition examines how organic  
forms are represented in static environments of handmade objects and structures.  
Curated by McMaster art history student Ola Wlusek.

Public Reception: Thursday January 19, 7-9





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- online **forums**
- online **renewals**
- online **payment**

and

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Volume 29 Number 1 January 2006

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FUSE is published four times a year by Artons Cultural Affairs Society  
and Publishing Inc., a non-profit artists' organization. All inquiries and  
return of undeliverables to the following address:

Artons Cultural Affairs  
454-401 Richmond St W  
Toronto ON M5V 3A8 (Canada)  
email: [subscriptions@fusemagazine.org](mailto:subscriptions@fusemagazine.org)  
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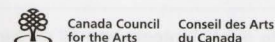
Publications Mail agreement No. 1396609  
Registration No. 8623  
ISSN 0838-603X

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Board.

Subscription rates: \$20 per year; Institutions \$32 per year (in Canada only).  
Outside Canada \$24 U.S. per year; Institutions \$38 U.S. Decisions regarding  
who qualifies as an individual subscriber remain the right of the publisher.

Printed in Canada by Sonic Print Management.

FUSE is indexed in the Alternative Press Index and is distributed by, and a  
member of, the Canadian Magazine Publisher's Association, 700-425 Adelaide  
St W, Toronto, Ontario M5V 3C1, tel: (416) 504-0274. FUSE is a member of the  
Independent Press Association, San Francisco. FUSE acknowledges the  
financial support of the Government of Canada through the Publications  
Assistance Program and the Canada Magazine Fund toward our mailing,  
editorial, production, and project costs. We also acknowledge financial  
assistance from the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council.  
Finally, we are grateful for the many hours of volunteer and partially paid  
labour that are provided by everyone listed on our masthead, and some not  
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Canada



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**ARTEXTE**  
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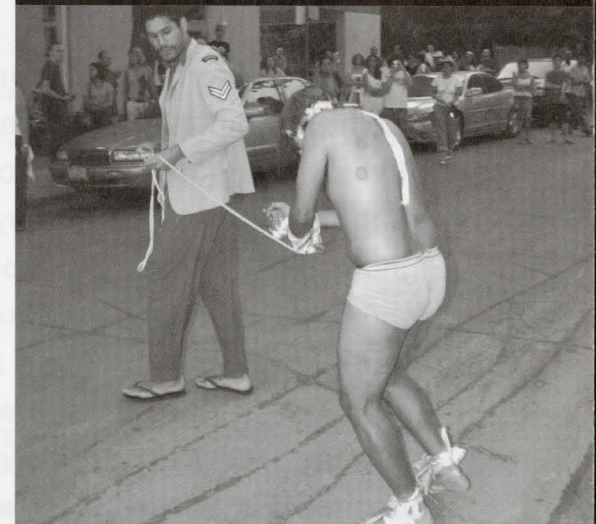
## Columns



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## Short Fuse Artist Project



## Pimping out the 'hood

Talk in Toronto's West Queen West late November was that someone had spray-painted "Drake you ho, this is all your fault" on a Starbucks that had appeared a scant two blocks east of the 'boutique' hotel.

(Yes, this is a tale from Toronto. When Fuse publishes articles on gentrification, we usually end up using our immediate surroundings as case study — and we feel weird about that. When we published Rosemary Donegan's "Whatever happened to Queen St. West" (Fuse 10:3, Fall 1986), the very first footnote apologised for the apparent Toronto-centrism of the piece. Gentrification is an ongoing issue, and one not restricted to downtown Toronto: The drop in the vacancy rate,

and subsequent condo-isation, of artist-friendly neighbourhoods in Montreal; the re-staging of the 'unintended consequences' of Expo 86 in Vancouver with the 2010 Olympics; the ironic pressures attempting to force artist-run centres out of 'prime' real estate in Halifax and Kingston; the list goes on. Gentrification is, by definition, a local issue ... in the same way that globalisation is a local issue. The consequences are local and diffuse, the 'causes' only to be found at a safe distance away. In this issue, we offer Adrian Blackwell's feature as a primer on how an understanding of the local can lead to a better understanding of the general. And, of course, we would encourage those better positioned to contribute

from their local to send us potential stories to cover in future issues.)

Back to WQW ... immediately after the appearance of the tag, people sent their friends to see the graffiti and on-line bulletin boards lit up with related conversations — the inevitability of gentrification, the role of artists in the process, the merits of moving out of town and whether it was Starbucks or Jeff Stober (the Drake's owner/impresario) who painted over the tag (about a week after it appeared).

Not only did the graffiti express a growing frustration over the gentrification of the neighbourhood — rising rents, increased traffic and policing, line-ups, condo developments, lifestyle stores (replacing the various small businesses that have been the fabric of the street) — but it named the Drake as the centre of a now pressing situation. After all, it isn't just any chain coffee shop that has appeared in the neighborhood (we're sure a Tim Horton's would not have been met with the same horror) but one whose very characterization can be located in the super skinny mocha latte frappuccino.

Casting the Drake, which followed artists to the neighborhood, as the "ho" in this scenario accuses the hotel of getting into bed with the various condo developers, chain stores and scenesters that are now plaguing the community — it sold itself out and the neighborhood was brought along for the ride.

**"The artist/musicians and their cohorts — people who have worked and lived in the area for a number of years — are quite conscious of this process [of gentrification]. Indeed, they are hardly able to ignore it. They grumble about escalating rents, tourists, teeny-boppers and up-towners taking over their local hang-outs. There is much lamenting for the way it used to be; the authenticity and originality of which are never clearly defined. Yet there is an implicit unspoken understanding of a community and its meaning."**

Rosemary Donegan,  
"Whatever Happened to Queen St West?" FUSE 10:3 (Fall 1986), p. 10.

Did the Drake prostitute itself to Starbucks — selling out its ideals for profit? Not really. The Drake has merely added money and polish to what was an already gentrifying neighborhood. In the process, it promised to merge the creative class with the class that wants the affiliation, but not the poverty. It never promised to try and keep any semblance of the neighborhood intact (quite the contrary, in fact).

A few days after the graffiti had been painted over, someone returned and slightly amended the tag: "Drake you pimp this is your fault." For some reason, this version was more offensive, disap-

pearing in less than a day. Perhaps this is due to the interesting shift in the analogy, one that more accurately represents the economics of the situation. In exchange for a cut of the take, a pimp solicits and procures clients and offers some measure of protection from disgruntled or disagreeable Johns. This relationship is an unequal one although, when it comes to disagreements with their employees, pimps try to exact only the most subtle retribution. Black eyes are bad for business.

Part of the appeal of the Drake has always been the cosseted artists it has proffered to its clientele, performers selected (or

curated) to offer a modicum of titillation to the bar patrons without going so far as to put them off their feed. The relationship between the pimp and the ho is a complicit one, though it is possible that the ho does not believe she has many options outside of getting involved in the racket. While the exposure (and small stipends) the Drake offers its artists might be appealing, it can't help but cause a little discomfort as well. All of the sudden those who took advantage of a neighbourhood's economic stagnation to snap up cheap storefronts and open up the boutique or gallery they had dreamed of are themselves being ...

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04/20



## How to Survive as an Artist:

Vera Frenkel at the CARFAC annual general meeting and conference.

Gladstone Hotel, Toronto  
24 September 2005

by Vera Frenkel

On 23–24 September 2005 at the Gladstone Hotel in Toronto, the Ontario branch of CARFAC (Canadian Artists' Representation/Le front des artistes canadiens), the national association of visual artists, hosted the organization's annual general meeting and conference. This year's theme was *Surviving as an Artist*, and included a session on the Status of the Artist Council, and an armchair discussion with invited artists Gordon Rayner, Vera Frenkel, Robin Pacific and Noel Harding. The following is an expanded version of the notes Frenkel prepared for the event.

During a recent interview for the *Visible Cities* project,<sup>1</sup> the questions I was asked included the following: *What does it mean to be an artist and sustain one's practice over time? In Toronto? Elsewhere?* So the issue of sustaining a practice over time, of surviving as an artist — not as a teacher, writer, speaker, consultant or an altogether non-cultural worker — has arisen recently in more than one context.

Beyond issues of place or duration, the real question is how to survive as an artist in an art-hating culture, a culture in which artists and their work are not seen as an essential part of the social fabric but, even if adored or envied, are nevertheless considered peripheral to the society's identity as it evolves.

In an attempt to mask and perhaps correct this paradox, increasing numbers of honours and prizes have been invented, and the brief period of acknowledgment and any financial benefits attached are of course much appreciated by their recipients. However, the prizes would have more meaning if they weren't so severed from the milieu they purport to represent.

To sustain one's practice over time in Canada in fact requires leading a double life: The one in which one's skills and services can generate an income, and the other, hidden, inner life that is the engine of creativity, expressed only intermittently as time and resources permit, often for the benefit of a small, like-minded milieu, or else under the radar completely.

To persist takes some doing. What's extraordinary is how long a practice can be sustained with relatively little encouragement. Artists are like deliquescent plants; they open and unfold and blossom in even the tiniest bit of water. Of course we don't know how many wonderful artworks and practitioners we've lost to dehydration.

The first and most important source of support is always other artists. Nothing can equal an empathetic peer group. This in itself is not so easy to achieve since everyone is competing for limited space, time and other resources, but bonding and the recognition of shared interests do happen and in Canada the development of CARFAC and the artist-run centres at roughly the same time was a most powerful expression of this necessity.

The task of nurturing art's hidden inner life and its relation to public consciousness is also sometimes met by curators, critics and historians, some of whom genuinely love art (including, on occasion, even Canadian art), and enjoy working with artists. These are allies to be cherished.

As for sustaining a practice over time outside Canada, I can say by way of a tiny illustration that buying art supplies in Paris, for example, was an experience quite different from anything I've ever encountered here. Somehow, despite there being ten thousand or more artists in Paris, most of them destined for anonymity, the culture in general is respectful and appreciative of their contribution, an appreciation embedded in the smallest transaction so that it is possible to sustain a studio practice for a lifetime with dignity, and to feel supported even if relatively unknown.

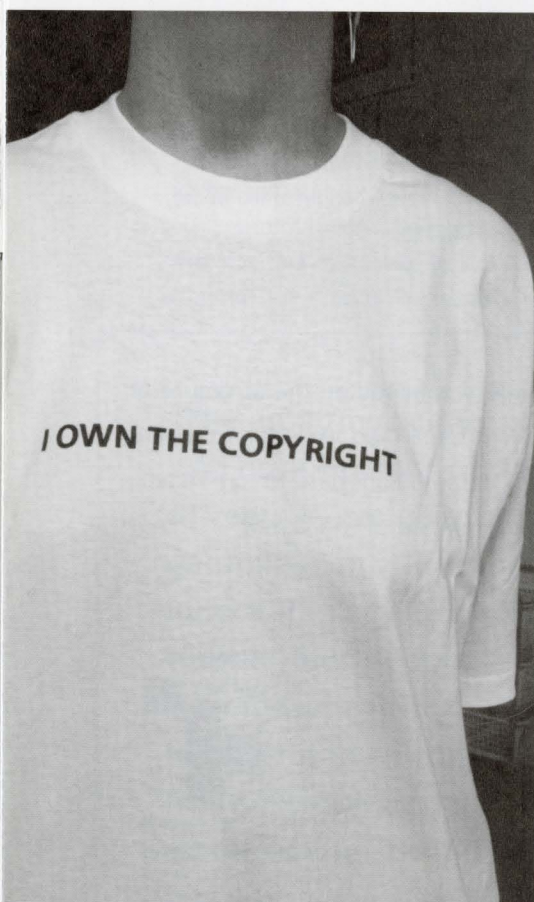
On a less vernacular level, I have to say that with the exception of the kind of inde-



CARFAC copyright demonstration at the AGO, April 1988, Courtesy: CARFAC

pendent curator described above, my experiences with full-time curators employed by major museums in this country have been quite perturbing. Being neither young enough to be considered "emerging" in their terms (although by definition an artist is someone who is constantly emerging...), nor old enough to be clearly on the verge of demise, I occupy the heart of a state which in wiser nations is seen as mature, a state when the full strength of a practice can be perceived, but which in Canada often remains invisible.

The very fact of having survived at all — artists aren't really supposed to persist beyond the early "discovery" years — is more often punished than appreciated. And heaven knows what forms of Oedipal/Electra complex are at work in interactions with curators. While I don't want to speculate as to the early childhood domestic dynamics of those who determine what art is or is not seen in this country, something odd animates the range of responses, from ignorance to



CARFAC Copyright Collective Inaugural Sign-Up Day, 1990, Courtesy: CARFAC



martyrdom, imposed on most artists by the gatekeepers.

Along with the public galleries and museums, arts councils are often party to unwitting (one hopes it's unwitting) ageism and misogyny. My requests for a simple summary of the age and gender make-up of juries in all disciplines served by the Canada Council have been met with either obfuscation or silence. I even recruited a former director of the Canada Council to obtain this information for me, and that didn't work either.

From the panelists' responses to questions asked this morning by Kristian Clarke, Director of CARFAC-Ontario, on the role of the artist in relation to the rest of society, it seems we all agree that the artist has to earn an income by other means than via his or her studio practice; and that the so-called successful artist is admired more in the culture at large as a creator of investment opportunities for collectors than as



Surviving as an Artist Conference, Toronto, 2005, Photo: Sonja Reynolds, Courtesy: CARFAC

creator, reflector and custodian of the cultural imagination, although sometimes these two interests do converge. And, curiously, when it comes to arts council administrators and their subordinates, the artist as often as not is viewed more as adversary than as ally.

In the 70s when I was the token artist on a twelve-member Ontario Arts Council Board (originally the Province of Ontario Council for the Arts, or POCA), during the enlightened directorship of the late Louis Applebaum, I made a point of reading transcripts of debates in the legislature pertaining to cultural questions. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that the level of understanding on the part of Ontario's political representatives at the time was nil and their attitude towards the arts contemptuous. I remember reading these accounts in a state of shock, realizing that these were the people voting on policy and budget for the arts council, people for whom the profound importance of the arts had somehow to be made present to the imagination, and that that was the job of the Board, a job the OAC took very seriously at the time. I'm not sure how that commitment to advocacy stands today on that or any other board.

We now have three visual artists, David Thauberger, Tom Hill and Amir Ali Alibhai as board members on the Canada Council, and that's good, but I'd be interested to

see a summary of the numbers of board members by discipline and a chart of the lengths of their respective service. The visual arts have been relatively poorly represented at the Council's board level over the years, which no doubt has had something to do with the lack of support of its Visual Arts Programme, a dearth that was translated last year into a draconian and, in my view, insufficiently-considered funding proposal that caused uproar across the country.<sup>2</sup> François Lachapelle, the officer who presented that proposal and designed the opaque decision-making process that gave rise to it, was trying to stretch a queen-sized budget over a king-sized constituency and chose a corporate route. ("The research model no longer meets our needs," I was told by one staff member, "The pressure now is to shift to a production model.")

Mr. Lachapelle's constituents, myself included, reacted vehemently against the proposal. Some changes made to the plan were announced subsequently via a series of public meetings, and I believe that the resulting hybrid programme is now being implemented. But the central issue of why the board isn't more effective in recruiting and deploying funds for the visual arts has not been addressed in an open way by the director, John Hobday, nor by the officers struggling under pressure of insufficient support, nor by members of the arts community unable to rely on even rudimentary sponsorship.

Recently, on the eve of a threatened election call, much was made of a promised funding increase to the Canada Council. Three days prior to the November 28th non-confidence vote that brought down the Liberal Government, we learned that circa \$300 million would be allotted to the Canada Council budget over the next five years, nearly doubling it. It remains to

be seen how the visual arts will fare in relation to the other disciplines and, assuming the funds remain available, whether the exemplary and wide-ranging "research" model and peer review process will be retained and respected.

I understand that the names of the Canada Council's board members appear on their website, although the last few times I looked, I was unable to find them. When I inquired at the time, it was suggested by two staff members independently that this was perhaps in order to protect members of the board from unwanted communications. Surely a slate of such importance should be placed online front and center, along with contact information, so as to be accessible to the constituencies the Council serves.

If there is serious concern regarding nuisance mail, it's a simple matter to set up and monitor a special email account (yes, it's true that following the series of budget cuts of the recent past, everyone on staff is already overworked and understandably reluctant to take on yet another task, but with the prospect of long overdue funding en route, we are in a position to hope that things can be done differently and better.)

Not that posting a list of board members is always a comfort. Reading through the list of the Status of the Artist Council members footnoted below,<sup>3</sup> I don't discern a single visual artist, museum director or curator. Of thirteen board members, not counting the chair's wide-ranging interests or those of the film festival director, seven are identified as being involved with the performing arts. As for the visual arts, a lawyer with an interest in estate planning and copyright questions, worthy as he may be, is not a practitioner.

Taking the long view, it seems that on the specific role of the visual arts in Canada, there's not much good to report. From the Department of External Affairs to your local arts council, the performing arts get most of the attention and support across the country. Even in Quebec, perhaps our most enlightened province with respect to understanding the relation of art to identity, it is dance, theatre and film that top the funding agenda. The "bums in seats" mantra that politicians wear like T-shirt logos has no equivalent in the visual arts. Quiet contemplation isn't measurable by counting asses.

Governments of most civilized countries know that the arts must and should be subsidized. In Canada, the lobbyists' preferred argument is that the arts foster tourism, and despite the many other known benefits of a vibrant cultural sector, this argument is made to the neglect of others. True enough, but not at all the central issue.

The brilliant educator and scientist, Ursula Franklin, in her CBC Massey lectures, chose the metaphor of the earthworm as a creature that nourishes and aerates the soil to describe the importance of education. Sometimes I think that at some unexpressed level we artists are perceived simply as worms, without the nourishing and aerating bit. People outside the arts may have a sense of what the world might be without us, but rarely admit it even to themselves.

Another way of characterizing the disenfranchised role of the artist is as raw material; bauxite, for example, as my friend and colleague art historian Elizabeth Legge likes to say. It is from bauxite, she reminds me, that others make aluminum, and much profit. Yet another image has come to mind recently, startling at first, but one which



CARFAC Constitution Conference, Vancouver, 1976, Courtesy: CARFAC



then regrettably seems to fit. In Canada, the artist and the rest of society have the kind of relationship that connotes date rape: We go out together, one party trusting, the other armed with charm, promises and soporifics. Waking, the artist discovers that the promises were empty, the motives crude and the result humiliating.

For visual artists who work with a skilled and caring dealer or representative, there is an advocate and a buffer. For an artist choosing to work *outside* the mutually supportive triangle of dealer/investor/institution (each augmenting the value of an acquired work in what can often be a smoke-and-mirrors spiral), there is no buffer and no advocate and sometimes CARFAC provides the only line in the sand, and even that line, gentle as it is, can be betrayed on occasion by a host institution.

The director of an important contemporary public gallery — an otherwise smart, empathetic and idealistic person — mentioned to me how distressed she was by what she took to be CARFAC's aggressive raising of artists' fees and lack of appreciation of her institution's own struggle to make ends meet. It is quite true that galleries and museums are low on the national funding agenda unless there's some diplomat in town requiring a token gift or an embassy abroad in need of decorating. In fact, the whole sector is in crisis, and a careful analysis of that crisis reveals an upside down pyramid in which the weight of the entire milieu rests on a single sharp point, digging into the artist's neck.

I'm a pretty good speller, but when I sat down to type out these notes, "survive" somehow kept appearing with an e: "serve," as in servant, service, serve, servile, — as in the unpaid or underpaid service of others without voice or alternatives.

What CARFAC provides is a voice and a melody, the melody being our sense of how things should and could be and the collective voice our means of getting there. I'm amazed when I learn of otherwise savvy artists who aren't members.

Knowing that CARFAC exists, most of the time in good hands, and is working for our interests, has certainly contributed to my survival and to the survival and flourishing of the visual arts in Canada, to the extent possible, and for that I'm most grateful.

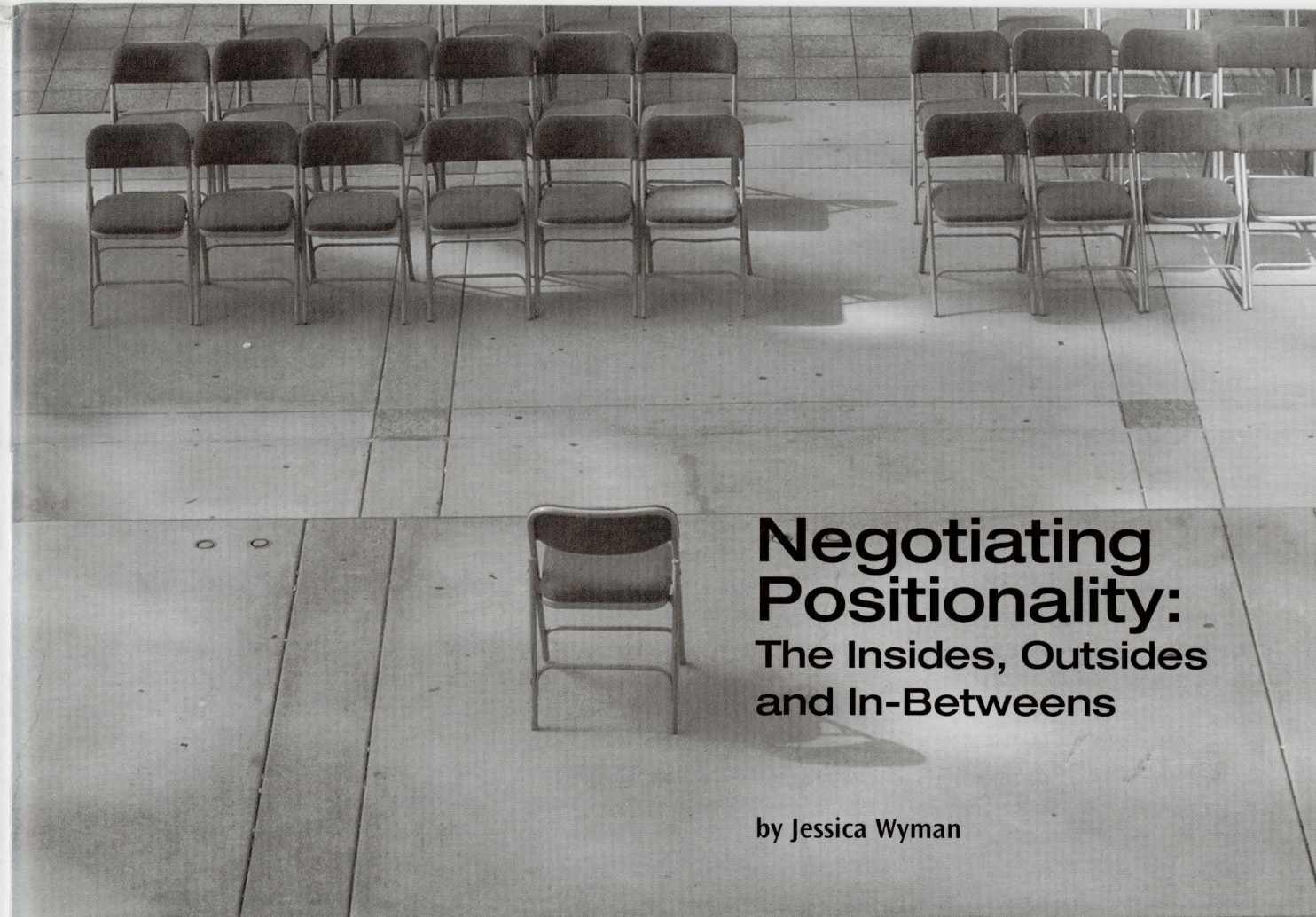
Given the nature of our work, visual artists need a place in which to feel acknowledged, safe and supported, particularly since the larger culture does not provide that. Politicians and other decision-makers who hold purse strings will listen if the constituency is large and vocal enough. We must create that space ourselves, making sure that, rather than becoming bureaucratized and professionalized, it stays loose and open, candid and informal, but always effective, not only for our own well-being but for those who follow.

*One of carfac's first representatives, multidisciplinary artist Vera Frenkel lives and works in Toronto. Her installations and new media works have been shown at the Venice Biennale; documenta IX; MoMA; the National Gallery of Canada, and the Freud Museum, London, among other major venues. In early 2005, her current touring project on the inner life of a dysfunctional cultural organization, The Institute™: Or What We Do for Love (www.the-national-institute.org), received the 2004 ccca Untitled Art Award for best new media project. Of Memory and Displacement, a four-disc dvd/cd-rom collection of Vera Frenkel's videotapes, media works and writings, as well as commentary on her work, was released this spring.*

*CARFAC (Canadian Artists' Representation/le Front des artistes canadiens) is the national association of professional visual and media artists. Founded in 1968, CARFAC has worked for over three decades on the legal and economic issues facing artists. We believe that artists, like professionals in other fields, should be paid for their work and share equitably in the profits from their art practice.*

#### Notes:

1. "Visible Cities: Translocalities and Creative Cultures," organized by Janine Marchessault and Karyn Sandlos, department of film and video, York University.
2. 2004 proposed Canada Council Visual Arts Programme, prior to adjustments. A version annotated by Vera Frenkel is accessible on the fuse website.
3. Status of the Artist Council Membership:
  - Council Chair (Toronto) Dr. Jim Fleck, O.C. Chairman, Council for Business and the Arts in Canada and President, Art Gallery of Ontario Foundation (Toronto)
  - Martin Bragg  
Artistic Producer, The Canadian Stage Company (Toronto)
  - Sam Coghlan  
President, Ontario Public Libraries Association (Embro)
  - Robert Dickson  
Poet, editor, performer and professor, Laurentian University (Sudbury)
  - Paulette Gagnon  
Executive Director, Association des théâtres francophones du Canada
  - Allan Gottlieb, C.C.  
Honorary Chairman, The Ontario Heritage Trust (Toronto)
  - Piers Handling  
Director & C.E.O., The Toronto International Film Festival (Toronto)
  - Drew Hayden Taylor  
Playwright and Script Writer (Toronto)
  - Tim Jones  
Executive Director, Toronto Artscape Inc. (Toronto)
  - Avon Macfarlane  
Executive Director, Major Gifts, University of Toronto (Toronto)
  - Aaron Milrad  
Arts and culture lawyer, lecturer, writer and Chair of the George R. Gardiner Museum of Ceramic Art (Toronto)
  - Dr. Ross H. Paul  
President and Vice-Chancellor, University of Windsor (Windsor)
  - Gina M. Rémy  
Director of Legal and Business Affairs, Corus Entertainment Inc. (Toronto)
  - Dr. Peter C. Simon  
President, The Royal Conservatory of Music (Toronto)
  - Veronica Tennant, C.C.  
Television producer and former Prima Ballerina (Toronto)



## Negotiating Positionality: The Insides, Outsides and In-Betweens

by Jessica Wyman

Setup of chairs for Metro Square event, 2004. All photos this article: John Dummett, Courtesy: Kirsten Forkert

In mid-September 2004, three discussions open to the public were held in three locations that are variously perceived as public. These conversations were intended to focus on the nature of public cultural participation, exploring possibilities, limitations and questions of access. Initiated by Kirsten Forkert and John Dummett and moderated by Marcus Miller, Paul Couillard and Christine Shaw, participants highlighted exactly the interests (and stakes) involved in such undertakings, examining the degree to which public space is expected to be volatile and contested.

These conversations, under the overarching title *In/Out of Position*,<sup>1</sup> were, perhaps most amazingly, real conversations. They were not lectures, not seminars or workshops, but opportunities for people to come together and converse on matters

of political commitment and engagement. What does it mean to occupy — both for artistic purposes and more prosaic ones — the space we have come to call "public" without having interrogated what that designation signifies, nor who has designated any space or activity as such?

Forkert and Dummett's title, *In/Out of Position*, was a source of much questioning within this process. Some of the participants wondered about the slash, the divide between the "in" and the "out," which was important to the sessions' organizers. This was rearticulated by Christine Shaw through Gilles Deleuze's "and ... and ... and ..." in which the ellipses indicate possibilities of both fullness and movement in interstitial spaces. In speech, this set of conversations was often referred to as "in and out of posi-

tion," but the slashing of In/Out seemed more fulsome than that, posing a much less certain relation to positionality. The choices of location, the audience/participants who joined in, the very notion that these discussions were meant to interrogate positionality served to highlight how fixed are our understandings of the way space functions, how limited are our understandings of the possibilities for polysemic engagement in space, site, publicness, and participation. Considering any or all of these in real ways forces us to locate and interrogate our positions precisely through their articulation.

Take as an example the three sites in which this set of conversations was held over the weekend: Friday evening's conversation took place in the Education Theatre at the Art Gallery of Ontario; Saturday





Left: Discussion at Metro Square, facilitated by Paul Couillard, 2004  
Right: Discussion in front of Mercer Union, facilitated by Christine Shaw, 2004



Left: Discussion on the corner of Queen and Lisgar, facilitated by Christine Shaw, 2004  
Right: Discussion at Metro Square, facilitated by Paul Couillard, 2004

afternoon's gathering was held at Metro Square, an outdoor civic space beside Toronto's Metro Hall, just off King Street West; Sunday's words were exchanged on the street in front of Mercer Union, an artist-run centre in Toronto's west end.

Each of these venues was open to anyone who wished to participate. With this in mind, however, the AGO is inherently marked as a space of limited access and the Education Theatre, while a comfortable space in which to have a conversation, is located in the bowels of the building and unlikely to be happened upon by someone not intentionally seeking it out. While information about this set of events had been circulated and made public, it takes both foreknowledge and commitment for a person to appear in a public art gallery on an evening when it would otherwise not be open to the public. This suggests that a person interested enough in such an event to attend is one who already feels at least somewhat comfortable entering into such an institution, one of the first of the interrogations of site and assumed privilege to be raised over the weekend.

Upon arriving at Metro Square the following day — a space all-but-empty on a Saturday afternoon when the municipal offices in the adjacent building were closed for the weekend — it was discovered that without having been requested, the chairs were arranged in a wide semi-circle atop an elevated retractable stage and facing an

audience-style arrangement of chairs on the plaza below. Such an imposing set-up served to announce the expectation on the part of city staff that any conversation taking place in public space would require the format of the proscenium to establish authority. This particular arrangement or architecture of space highlighted the ways in which the place one is located affects the ways in which one speaks and caused Dummett to note that the "second architecture of a space is the set of assumptions that go along with it." This literal elevation of space caused no small amount of discomfort among the group, with Paul Couillard, that session's discussion facilitator, refusing to become an elevated object and the entire group relocating to a space within Metro Square that was ultimately even more elevated and somewhat more remotely located within the architecture of the square.

On Sunday afternoon, the gathering at Mercer Union took place on the sidewalk in front of the artist-run centre, itself located in a part of the city that is inhabited by many artists, a neighbourhood in the process of gentrification that is replete with art galleries and cafes. Here, more than in the other two spaces, the group continued to grow as people joined the initial number, attributable perhaps to the familiarity (or accessibility) of the site to those who identified themselves as constituents of the local contemporary art community, a group that comprised the

majority of the participants. Indeed, as one of the conversation's contributors noted, we are accustomed to dealing so specifically with the local that people will often not travel to spaces with which they are unfamiliar, even when those spaces are nearby and the events of interest.

And so, this set of discussions came to be very much about the dynamics of site and public, the ways in which they are related and what is at times their very separateness. Marcus Miller, for example, pointed out that a public can be mobile within a space (as in the instance of a particular gallery retaining its audience when it moves to a new location) and that site may be much less a question of architecture or geography than of its social and cultural dimensions. This suggests that even as architectural and locational specificities have material and non-material effects on the social relations they house, perhaps too much power is thought to accrue to space (as site) itself.

And yet ... this question of space and site cannot be eliminated when considering the desired outcomes for conversations such as these. While, in the words of Paul Couillard, "architecture is usually invisible to people until attention is drawn to it," architecture nonetheless significantly determines — even if only somatically — expectations of behaviour, activity, etc. At a basic level, entering the AGO required a presumption that one has access to such a

privileged space, whereas sitting on folding chairs on a city sidewalk may not carry such valences.

But still ... the people who came to these conversations, even the one that took place on the sidewalk, were, in the vast majority, people who already felt they had a place within communities of artistic practice and/or engagement, people who felt they already had access to the language of "public" and "artistic" discourse.

And so ... while these conversations could, I think, very reasonably and perhaps even unanimously be considered "successful," questions still remain about who speaks to and for whom in what spaces of power (or its dislocation), and whether these conversations serve to effect change in terms of real or perceived access to the making of decisions or operations in/as the public.

In all of these conversations, what remained productively unresolved was any definition of "public," either of space or of constituent. This lack of resolution was productive, at least for me, in that when the mythical "public" (or Public) was used to denote some category of place or person, it was almost immediately complicated or refused as a marker. Marcus Miller pointed to distinctions that can and perhaps should be made between a *public* and an *audience*, noting that even special interest groups are a/the public; Christine

Shaw noted that what are often called publics are groups that we hope to form/organize/bring together into communities; Paul Couillard contended that to use public space inherently challenges the possible or expected uses of space that is so often unthinkingly passed through but not inhabited or considered. Other participants suggested that the public is what we are and what we are in when we are in states of transition — between places, among people whom we do not know — and that questions that arose about responsibility to the "public" (on the part of artists, art exhibitors, etc.) too often implied a certain ignorance (however willful) on the part of the public. This marks an assumption that the capacities of both individuals and groups to come together meaningfully is fundamentally limited.

This last point is perhaps the most dangerous because this underestimation of the public is also the most true of the claims often embedded in work that is geared toward public engagement. Those of us who gathered in the AGO, on Metro Square, in front of Mercer Union were also a public, part of "the" public, even if, at those particular moments, part of a self-selected and small constituency of a much larger set of wholes. The admonition that "the public" is all too often underestimated (in terms of both interest and capacity to engage or be engaged) was readily agreed to by all present, who nonetheless seemed on the whole to consider themselves (our-

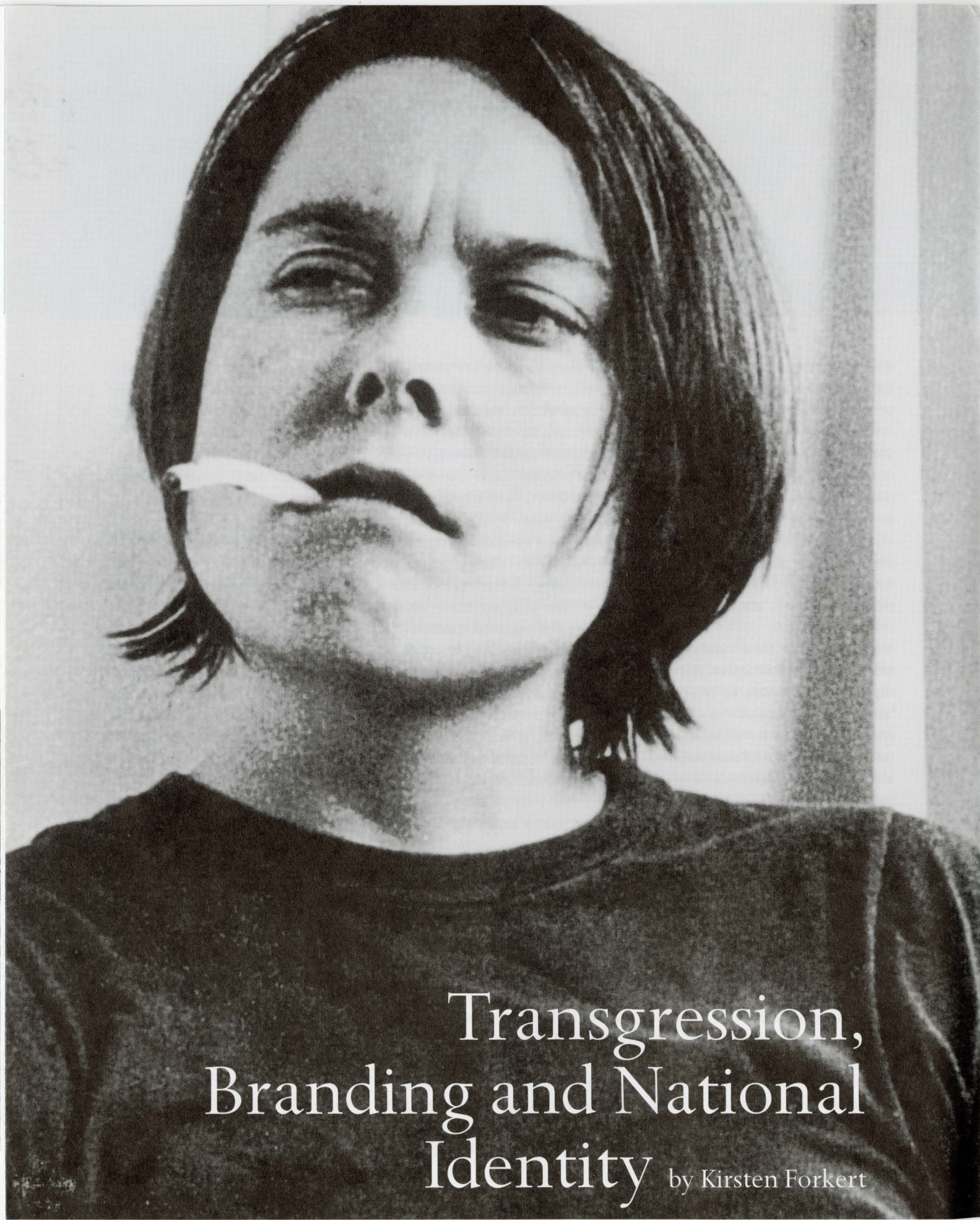
selves) something other than "hoi polloi." Why was our response to the targeted "marketing" of this event seen as less suspect than what was considered by the group to be generalized and less-considered (read: more consumer-oriented) responses to other forms of marketing?

Being public, being *the* public, and constantly negotiating the various positions and situations in which we find ourselves variously inside, outside or somewhere altogether else, is both easier and more difficult than it might seem. It is easier in that we are, always already, part of various publics, whether we choose them or not, and harder in that when we refer to "the public," we are almost always referring to some mythical body outside of ourselves of which we are not a part. We are all of us both in *and* out of position, always taking sides, always negotiating our locations as in, out, or in-between, and sometimes, as in the conversations that comprised *In/Out of Position*, all of these together.

*Jessica Wyman is a writer, curator and art historian living in Toronto and teaching in the faculty of liberal studies, Ontario College of Art and Design. She is a member of the Fuse magazine editorial committee, and is writing texts on political performance practices and performance historiography.*

The Canada Council's Interarts program funded *In/Out of Position* through their Off the Radar initiative.





# Transgression, Branding and National Identity

by Kirsten Forkert

Sarah Lucas, *Fighting Fire with Fire*, 1996, Collection of the British Council, Courtesy: the Artist and Sadie Coles HQ, London

Vancouver Art Gallery's recent "Body: New Art from the UK" exhibition is symptomatic of an increasing programming tendency in major institutions: the "cream of the crop" survey shows (other examples include the "Baja to Vancouver" exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery last year or the "Greater New York" show at PS1). These exhibits are usually not organized around a theme, idea, medium, aesthetic strategy, etc; instead, their organizing principle is the "best of" a particular region or generation. They make use of the main convention of the survey exhibition, which is the claim to be representative: certain artists (usually established on the cusp of commercial success) are taken to represent the best of cultural production taking place in a given location or at a given time. Such exhibitions make use (explicitly or implicitly) of avant-gardist rhetoric, including words like "new" or "hot." If generation (i.e. young artists) is the framing device, generational conflict is the defining narrative: the next generation of young upstarts breaks the rules set by the previous generation, and grabs the spotlight. The contradiction, however, is their combining of established rhetoric and often-predictable programming decisions: packaging established artists as "up and coming."

These exhibitions, then, are ultimately about who gets picked as representative, and along with this, the institutional, bureaucratic and corporate machinations invested in creating a particular representation. They are also about the (unproblematized) prestige and/or authority of who does the choosing: the curator or institution that determines the best of a given region or scouts out the next big thing.

Exhibitions like these operate according to a totalizing model: they are both prestigious (the cream of the crop) and "cutting edge" (the next big thing). Such contexts offer little room for artists to be genuinely critical, let alone oppositional. Andrea Fraser describes this situation as one where "museum and market have grown into an all-encompassing apparatus of cultural reification": where museums present work by artists the market has already validated, and the cultural capital associated with museum exhibitions increases the market value of the art. She points to the difficulty of staging a critique or intervention that would reveal hierarchies and exclusions. A related point is how museums seek to function as both the establishment and the cutting edge (purporting to include everyone and attempting to erase any contradiction between the two roles). It becomes difficult to see the exclusions as *political*. Rebecca Gordon Nesbitt describes this phenomenon as one where institutions try to be both sites of legitimation and avant-gardist experimentation (traditionally the domain of independent spaces).<sup>2</sup>

Other questions that need to be asked about the popularity of staging such exhibitions involve the relationship between their organizing principles and corporate sponsorship. Corporations desire to be associated with particular exhibitions. The "Greater New York" show was sponsored by the Altria Group and the "Body" exhibition by Gucci. Although it is difficult to identify the specific influence this sponsorship might have on programming, one might speculate as to whether the ideal work for these contexts is that which is fresh, new and young, even transgressive, but which does not question its implication in institutions and power relations (and may even be framed as postcritical).



In their text, "Art Capital," written at the height of the YBA phenomenon in the mid-nineties, Simon Ford and Anthony Davies argue that, "These days if you want to know what's happening in the artworld you have to look beyond the promotional blurb of the 'on message' hucksters to the financial and marketing media."<sup>3</sup> In other words, to understand such a heavily marketed phenomenon as YBA, one must look beyond the individual works and careers of artists, to examine the promotional apparatus: in this case art exhibitions, art institutions and artists in processes of marketing and legitimization: the YBAS (Damien Hirst, Tracey Emin, Sarah Lucas, the Chapman brothers, etc.), institutions such as the ICA and the Tate Modern, government agencies such as the British Council and the Cool Britannia campaign.<sup>4</sup>

The marketing of YBA was at least in part inspired by "creative industries" theories, which were promoted in the UK by the British Council, the Creative Industries Task Force and the Creative Forum for Culture and the Economy.<sup>5</sup> Theories merging culture with economics have more recently been popularized in North America by writers such as Richard Florida.<sup>6</sup> Two aspects of these theories are relevant here. The first is that if a city or region possesses or cultivates a vibrant and creative self-image then it is perceived as a good place for business, especially those businesses employing educated, technologically savvy and style-conscious young people. The second is that contemporary art is predominantly viewed through an entrepreneurial lens, as part of a broader spectrum of activities including fashion, lifestyle, advertising, entertainment and information technologies. The result of this is that contemporary art, with its associations of glamour and hipness, its history of avant-gardist experimentation (which, seen through a corporate lens is akin to ideas of "innovation") and non-commercial value, has become a very useful tool for the marketing and branding of regions, businesses and institutions. Contemporary art is seen as having the potential to generate a "buzz" for cities, attracting business and cultivating (or maintaining) their importance as centres in the global art market.

Contemporary art can potentially attract the coveted 18–35 demographic for businesses, and update the images of museums (especially those with falling ticket sales) wishing to present themselves as relevant and "cutting edge."

Specific to the UK, promoting the YBAS was a key aspect of cultural policy in the nineties, as it gave its national image a makeover. Major UK lifestyle corporations, including Selfridges and Habitat, also promoted the YBAS, as well as fashion magazines such as *Egg*, *Vogue* and *Dazed and Confused*. As Ford and Davies wrote in "The Surge to Merge Culture with the Economy,"

Young British art, as is apparent from its title, was promoted as a national art movement and this is why the British Council, a publicly funded organisation set up to promote British culture abroad, was so forthcoming in funding exhibitions and travel. During this period artists (and many other representatives from the Creative Industries) were utilised as cultural ambassadors to represent, and most importantly redefine, "British" culture to an international audience. The young British artists (along with the British workforce as a whole) were promoted as entrepreneurial, resourceful and independent — very much in line with the global positioning of a market-friendly 1990s Britain. In this respect, young British artists were called upon to camouflage increasing social division and inequality at home through the promotion of a rejuvenated entrepreneurialism abroad.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, while the UK projected a newly branded image of itself abroad, on the rise at home was growing economic stratification under a neoliberal climate exacerbated by the policies of the Thatcher and Blair administrations, racialized poverty, a housing crisis and anti-immigrant sentiment. Stuart Home, in his text "The Art of Chauvinism in Britain and France,"<sup>8</sup> argued that the image of the UK referred to by YBA, and its music industry equivalent, Britpop (nostalgically referring to the swinging sixties and a white working class

pastoral) could be seen as a form of cultural nationalism. While national stereotypes (such as the "English eccentric") do sometimes play a role in these exportations, the other approach seems to be official multiculturalism, which, it could be argued, in other ways also creates the impression that all is well at home.<sup>9</sup>

In a broader sense, this focus on the role of artists as cultural ambassadors leads to an emphasis on "show-case," celebrity and spectacle. This also means a shift in the function of state funding. Instead of providing a counterbalance to the market by supporting critical practices, non-commercial work and the expression of marginalized communities, the state promotes the artists who have already been validated by the market and on the international stage. It also means a shift in emphasis away from production and towards presentation. This model is not limited to the UK, with the recent changes to the Canada Council suggesting it could be adopted in our own country. The result of these developments (whereby contemporary art becomes politically and economically useful) is that exhibitions begin to increasingly function as a form of *institutional positioning*: they operate less as curatorial investigations in the traditional sense, and more as processes of marketing, legitimization and public relations.

The press release for the "Body" show at the Vancouver Art Gallery stated that the exhibition was part of a Canada/UK exchange program, organized by the British Council, called "UK Today: A New View," a "contemporary creativity from the United Kingdom in Vancouver."<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, the working exhibition title was "New British Art," not "Body," suggesting the importance of nation ("British") and generation ("New") as organizing principles. In relation to the theme, the press release offers the following general statement:

One of the persistent themes that links art and artists across generations and over centuries is the theme of the body. In the past three decades, while the more traditional genres of still life, landscape

and portraiture have sustained an enduring presence, it is "the body" that has emerged as the dominant subject of contemporary artistic practice. This interest in the body is in part a product of successive waves of feminism and a growing consciousness of the significance of sexual difference. But equally important has been an articulation of the body that emerges from a heightened awareness of cultural difference and the history of colonialism that continues to resonate throughout the world. Today, the body is no longer simply accepted as a universal symbol of a human presence; it is acknowledged as a complex, highly coded, shifting subject that lives within representation.<sup>11</sup>

This could be applied to many works, even those dealing with the body in the most oblique manner. The work is framed through two different generations: the first generation who works with the "body" as a site and vehicle of transgression, identified with YBA: Tracey Emin, Sarah Lucas, Cornelia Parker, Gillian Wearing, Jake and Dinos Chapman and Sam Taylor-Wood. The second generation approaches the body as a site of "complex social interactions:"<sup>12</sup> Tacita Dean, Douglas Gordon, Fiona Banner, Martin Boyce, Cathy Wilkes, Rebecca Warren and Carey Young. Given that these two "generations" were active at the same time, that those considered part of the second (Fiona Banner, Gillian Wearing and Douglas Gordon) were associated with YBA in the press and that their work displayed similar characteristics, the distinction seems particularly artificial.

Some of the work is textbook YBA: produced in the mid-to late-nineties, and displaying characteristics usually associated with the phenomenon: references to local vernacular (especially poor neighborhoods in London) and working-class culture as "authentic" if abject subject matter, outrageous/transgressive behaviour and an emphasis on the persona of the artist. There is Tracey Emin's *I've Got It All*, a photograph where she stuffs coins into her vagina, and *Something's Wrong*, an embroidered blanket based on the photograph. We also see



Sarah Lucas's self-portrait series where she presents herself as a self-styled bad girl: wearing a leather jacket and jeans, smoking a cigarette: an appropriation of the stereotype of male working-class fashion, as well as playing on the fish as slang for female genitals (one of the images is of Lucas holding a large salmon). As well as *Bunny Gets Snookered*, a sculpture of stuffed nylon stockings on a chair, a caricature of a woman's body. This could be read as a feminist appropriation of misogynist sculptural works (Hans Bellmer and Allen Jones come to mind) or simply as continuing this tradition — and capitalizing on its shock value. This ambiguity plays through the discourse around the work; both Emin and Lucas are positioned as post feminist, as a generation that, unlike earlier generations, no longer feels the need to be critical or overtly political.



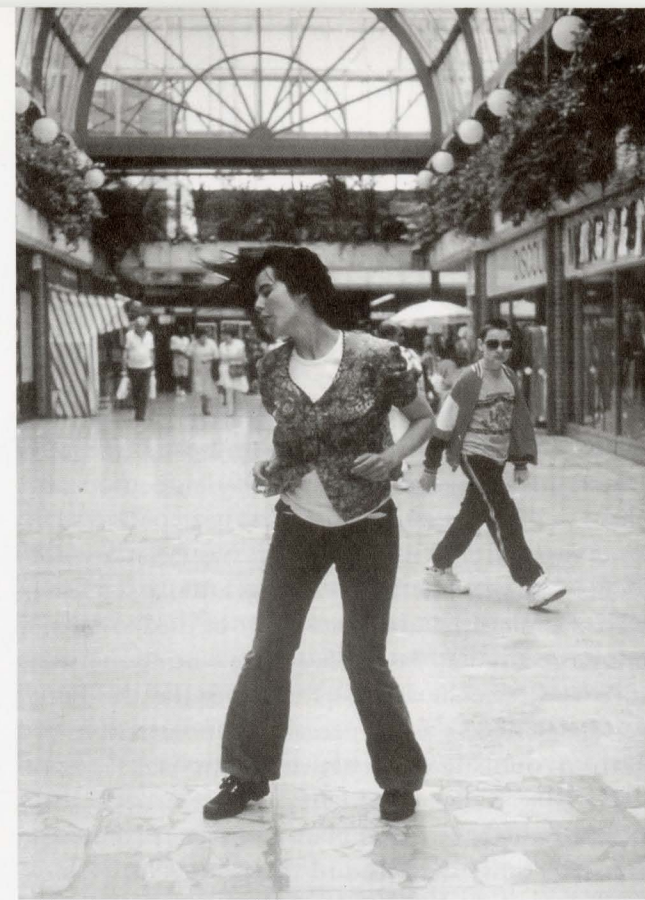
Sarah Lucas *Bunny Gets Snookered* #4, 1997, private collection, Courtesy: the Artist and Sadie Coles HQ, London

There is Gillian Wearing's *Dancing in Peckham* (an early work from 1994), where she dances by herself in a shopping mall in Peckham (a low-income south London neighbourhood) to various pop classics such as "I Will Survive" or "Smells like Teen Spirit." The work was inspired by seeing a woman dancing by herself in a club who was both enjoying and embarrassing herself in public. Another work is *Homage to the Woman with the Bandaged Face Who I Saw Yesterday Down Walworth Road*. The video is based on when Wearing saw a woman walking down the road with her face covered in bandages that seemed "more aesthetic than practical." She then decided to take on this persona — to walk down the road with a bandaged face, and videotape the reactions of passers-by. This is work about conventions of everyday human behaviour and those who choose to break them. I am reminded of Adrian Piper's "Catalysis" series. However, unlike Piper's work, Wearing's work does not extend to an analysis of the social conditions that produce such behaviour. To focus on the "human" is to keep things general.

Fiona Banner's work consists of two text panels side by side, one a mirror image of the other (the text faces forward on one and backwards on the other). The text describes, literally, the activities taking place in a porn film, in hot pink text (very similar to *Arsewoman in Wonderland*, the work that won her the Turner Prize in 2001). I'm left wondering about the reason for the backwards text — is it for aesthetic or conceptual reasons (or perhaps an aesthetics of conceptualism)? I'm reminded of Julian Stallabrass's description of 90s art in *Art, Inc.*:

Art in the 1990s has sometimes been thought of as a synthesis between grandiose and spectacular 80s art, with the techniques and some of the concerns of conceptual art. The result was to splice linguistic and conceptual play with visually impressive objects.<sup>13</sup>

The hot pink text and subject matter are sensational, while the use of text, the literal description and the for-



Gillian Wearing, *Dancing in Peckham*, 1994, video, Courtesy: the Artist and Maureen Paley, London

wards/backwards provide the conceptual coherence, and also refer to the use of text in 60s/70s Conceptualism.

Sam Taylor-Wood's *Five Revolutionary Seconds VI* is a panoramic photograph with a soundtrack playing out of speakers (conversation fragments recorded during the shooting process). The image depicts "young urban professionals" in a loft condo. The people seem isolated from one another, as they engage in activities such as talking on the phone; they seem "normal," with the exception of a pregnant woman with a bare belly. The work plays on loft condos and the people in them as objects of identification of desire, while suggesting the isolation and shallowness of the lifestyle.

Cornelia Parker presents a series of fake historical artifacts: *Marks Made by Freud*, *Subconsciously*, *Feather from Freud's Pillow (from the couch)*, and *Shared Fate (Oliver): doll cut by guillotine that beheaded Marie Antoinette*. These three works are characteristic of YBA in their irreverence, their one-liner quality (the title is the punchline) and the reference to violence or crime.

Douglas Gordon's *The right hand doesn't care what the left hand is doing* involves three monitors, all showing a pair of hands, where the right hand performs operations on the left: on the first the right hand covers the left hand

with shaving cream, then shaves it. On the second the right hand paints the left hand black. On the third, both hands try to free themselves from a set of gloves, which seem stuck together with the fingers intertwined. This continues Gordon's exploration of what happens in or out of the field of vision, and associations with the right or left hand, especially the left hand as "sinister."

Jake and Dinos Chapman's *My Giant Colouring Book* are a series of cartoonlike etchings, including teddy bears, clowns and other childhood symbols. It's reminiscent of certain recent tendencies in drawing (Marcel Dzama and others come to mind) and also the now familiar formula of combining the infantile with the perverse (Paul McCarthy or Mike Kelley; in general, one can draw strong links between LA slacker art and YBA).

There are more formal works, such as the paintings and sculptures by Martin Boyce and Rebecca Warren. Boyce's geometric paintings and sculptures are playful reworkings of Modernist design aesthetics. Rebecca Warren's blobby clay sculptures (glazed gold or pastel) are part of the current reworking of craft (textiles, ceramics — you respond to it like it's part of the grand tradition of sculpture, but are aware it's a parody).

Cathy Wilkes' installation suggests a tableau vivant of neglected or impoverished domestic settings, with sad pathetic furniture: in this case a mattress and a tray with the cryptic phrase stitched on it: "Our misfortune, photographed by Dorothea L." The formal simplicity and modestness of the installation is intriguing. However, I'm reminded of the worn or broken furniture people throw out or leave on the back porch, or that you see in the Salvation Army "as is" department. Wilkes' installation is successful in getting the viewer to respond on a physiological level, but, as I try to imagine sleeping on the mat, I cannot avoid associations with poverty, which the work seems to not be addressing.

Tacita Dean's 16mm film loop, *Mario Merz*, is a portrait of the sculptor shortly before his death. We see Merz



sitting under a tree, playing with a pinecone; he doesn't speak, which surprised audiences familiar with his opinionated personality. It's a portrait of the archetypal modernist male sculptor, with all the gestures of arrogance and grandeur. Dean has described Merz as "the overbearing artist who could misbehave in a way that is lost to my generation."<sup>14</sup> This work stands out for its thoughtfulness, and its serious investigation of these issues, beyond the one-liner or formula.

In a more general sense, Dean's description of Merz, which is about something that is now lost, reflects an important tendency in the exhibition, which is a sense of historical determinism, and as a response, a sense of melancholy. This made more obvious in Carey Young's video, *I am a Revolutionary*. Two figures (the artist and a voice coach) are standing in a corporate office interior. Both wear suits. Young repeats the phrase, "My name is Carey Young and I am a revolutionary." The coach tries to make her say it with conviction, but she is unable to do so convincingly. The work then reflects the futility of concepts such as revolution, because of their co-option by advertising and new management.

Young's work deals with corporate and institutional structures as material strategies — such as *Debt and Credit*, where she designed a loyalty card scheme — associated with institutional critique. And in fact, the merging of art, business and international relations as described by Davies and Ford would certainly provide fertile territory for critique. Whether Young's intentions are critical, however, is another question. In his text on Young's practice, Mark Godfrey writes,

The works might suggest a much less oppositional stance towards corporations than the work of Young's predecessors. Corporate strategies are not necessarily problematic, only problematic where directed to oppressive ends. Why not use incentive schemes, skills training, and the like? Perhaps in its resistance to them, the art world is hopelessly conservative. Why continue to see "art" and business as necessarily oppositional?<sup>15</sup>

Here we see the familiar narrative of postcriticality: that unlike previous generations (conjuring up images of earnest, unsmiling feminists and self-righteous identity politics), today's artists see no need to be oppositional. As mentioned before, this narrative has been used to describe first generation YBAS such as Emin and Lucas in terms of feminism, and it continues to be used to describe Young's generation. Adrian Searle, in writing about the above work when it was short-listed for the 2003 Beck's Award, described it as "impeccable demonstrations of a kind of art thinking which is itself institutional."<sup>16</sup>

There seem to be two dominant tropes here (similar, in a sense to those described in the press release): first, expressions of the artist as punk-rock, entrepreneurial individual, which is then used to promote business and international trade. Second (not mutually exclusive to the first), expressions of the impossibility of any social change, where we are post-feminism and post-institutional critique. This sense of impasse brings to mind Howard Singerman's writing on the artist in the post-modern academy, in which he argues that being a "knowing victim" of history has, ironically, become postmodernism's version of modernist transcendence.<sup>17</sup> If we know that nothing can be done, then at least we're not naive about it. And more importantly, we're off the hook in terms of having to do something.

However, to return to the discussion at the beginning, whose interests are served by either entrepreneurial individualism, or melancholic expressions of impasse? And further, what are the ideological implications of positioning work as post-critical, in the context of an "all-encompassing apparatus of cultural reification"<sup>18</sup> where exclusions are seen as "sour grapes" rather than intentional politics? I would argue that these approaches pre-empt any potential critique, and nullify any sense of political urgency. This way we don't need to question how work is produced or presented, how it is institutionally positioned. We especially don't need to question the role of art as public relations for government or business, or the role played by the art market in financial speculation and globalization.

I will end by noting that there is one articulation of "the body" missing here, especially in relation to concepts of "nation" implied by the term "British." None of the work in the exhibition takes up "a heightened awareness of cultural difference and the history of colonialism that continues to resonate throughout the world."<sup>19</sup> And now, in a climate of racial profiling, deportation of asylum seekers, rising anti-immigrant sentiment, and policing of public behaviour (from Anti-Social Behaviour Orders to banning the wearing of hoodies in certain public places), distinctions are being made between those treated as persons, as citizens with legal rights and those who are treated simply as "bodies" to be managed, criminalized, and in some cases imprisoned or deported. This definition of "body" is neither glamorous nor titillating. This "increasing social division and inequality at home"<sup>20</sup> represents the darker side of the nationalism that can be a subtext of celebratory international exchanges; those without rights or mobility represent the darker side of the free, entrepreneurial individual.



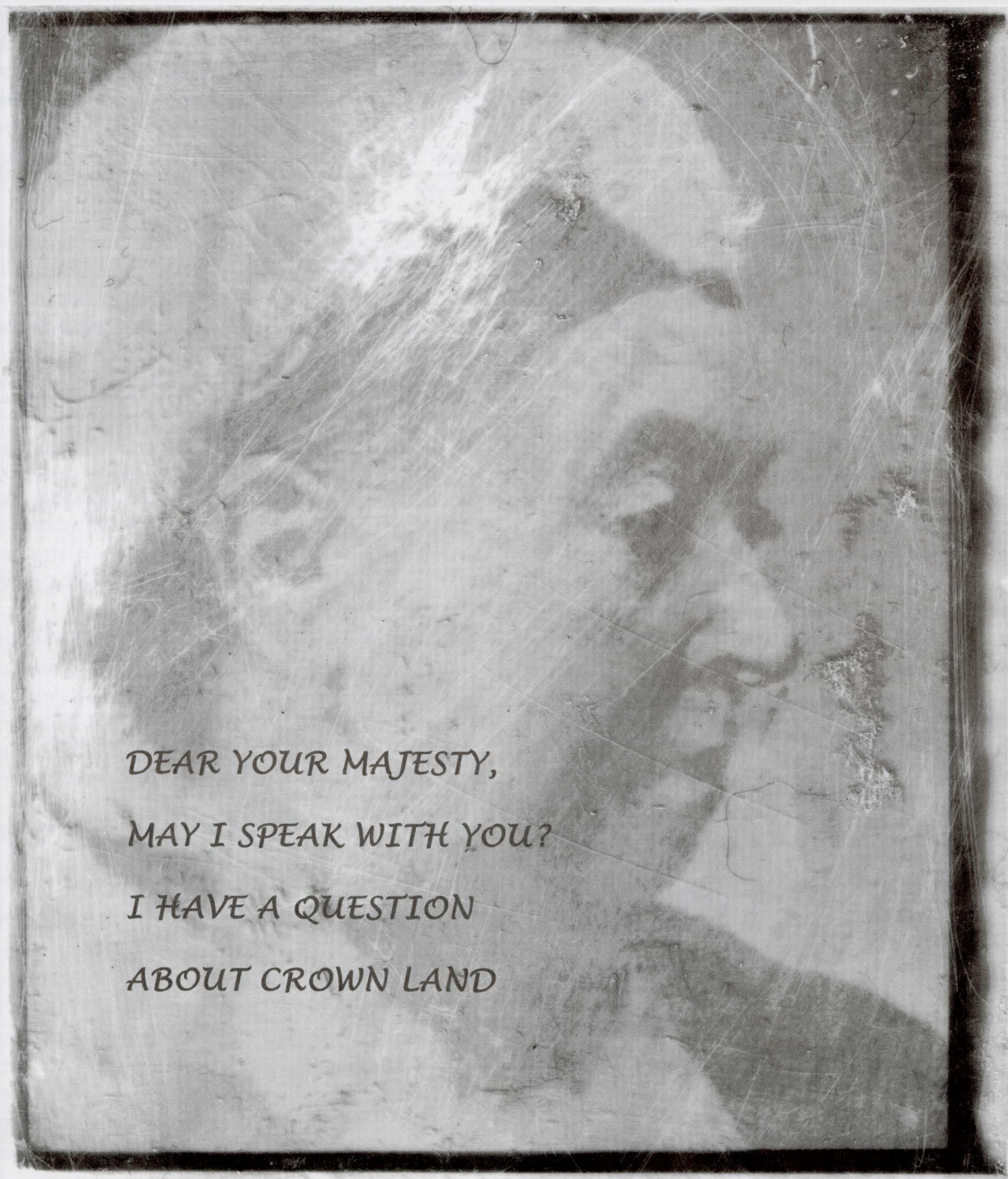
Kirsten Forkert is an artist, writer and teacher. Her work explores the effects of neoliberalism on our everyday experience, especially how we internalize ideologies of "there is no alternative," and how we might imagine and enact resistance. Her work also questions art as a specialized field. Kirsten is from Canada, but is now living in New York City, where she is participating in the Whitney Independent Study Program.

#### Notes:

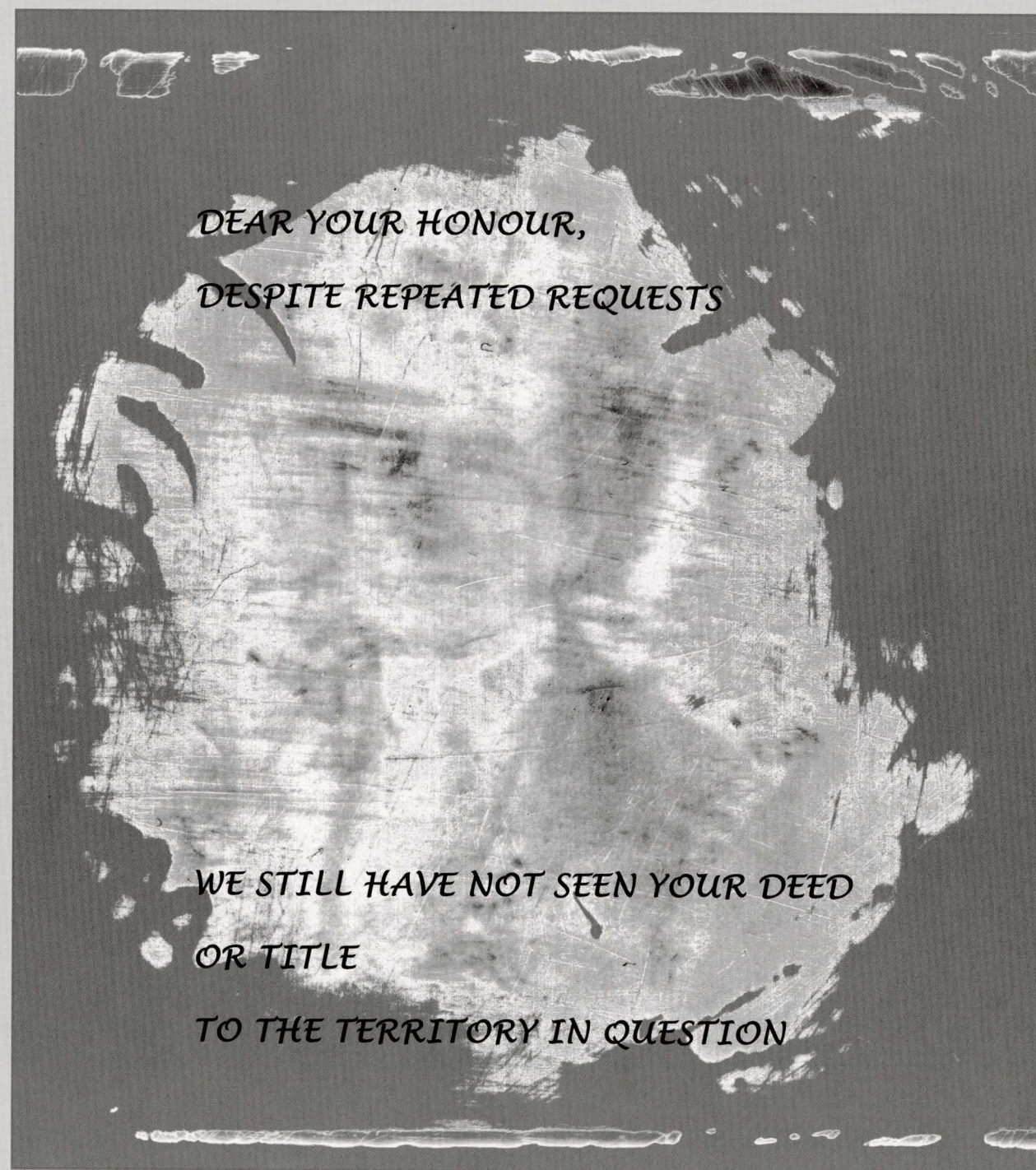
1. Andrea Fraser, "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique," *Artforum* (Sept 2005), p.278-279.
2. Rebecca Gordon Nesbitt, "Harnessing the Means of Production" in *Verkstedt#1*, 2003: *New Institutionalism*. (Office for Contemporary Art, Oslo, Norway.) Also at <http://www.societyofcontrol.com/pmwiki/Akademie/uploads/Main/harnessing.htm>
3. Anthony Davies and Simon Ford, "Art Capital," *Art Monthly* (213, February 1998).
4. *Cool Britannia* was an advertising scheme by the Blair government in the mid-nineties, to "brand" Britain as hip and entrepreneurial and especially to promote London as a financial centre.
5. The Creative Industries Task force was a body set up by the Blair administration in 1997 and included representatives from the music, fashion and advertising industries. The Creative Forum for Culture and the Economy was a UK think tank for corporate sponsorship and the arts.
6. Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class and How It's Transforming Work, Leisure and Everyday Life*. (New York: Basic Books, 2002).
7. Davies and Ford, "The Surge to Merge Culture with the Economy," Lecture delivered at Copenhagen Free University, 2001. <http://www.copenhagenfreeuniversity.dk/AD01.html>
8. Stuart Home, *The Art of Chauvinism in Britain and France*. <http://www.stewarthomesociety.org/2art.html>
9. <http://www.britishcouncil.org>
10. <http://www.britishcouncil.org/canada-vancouver-2005.htm>
11. Press release, "Body: New Art from the UK". Vancouver Art Gallery, 2005.
12. Ibid.
13. Julian Stallabrass, *Art, Inc.* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005), p.153-154.
14. Tacita Dean quoted in Christopher Master, "Mario Merz," *Guardian Online* (13 November 2003). <http://www.guardian.co.uk/italy/story/0,12576,1083845,00.html>.
15. Mark Godfrey, *Works Both Ways: Carey Young's Projects for the Kunstverein München*. <http://www.careyyoung.com/essays/godfrey.html>
16. Adrian Searle, *The Future's Dim*. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/arts/critic/feature/0,1169,932229,00.html>
17. Howard Singerman, *Art Subjects: Making Artists in the American University*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).
18. Fraser, p.278-279.
19. Press release, "Body: New Art from the UK."
20. Davies and Ford.

Tracey Emin, *I've Got It All*, 2000, Courtesy: the Artist and Jay Jopling/White Cube, London





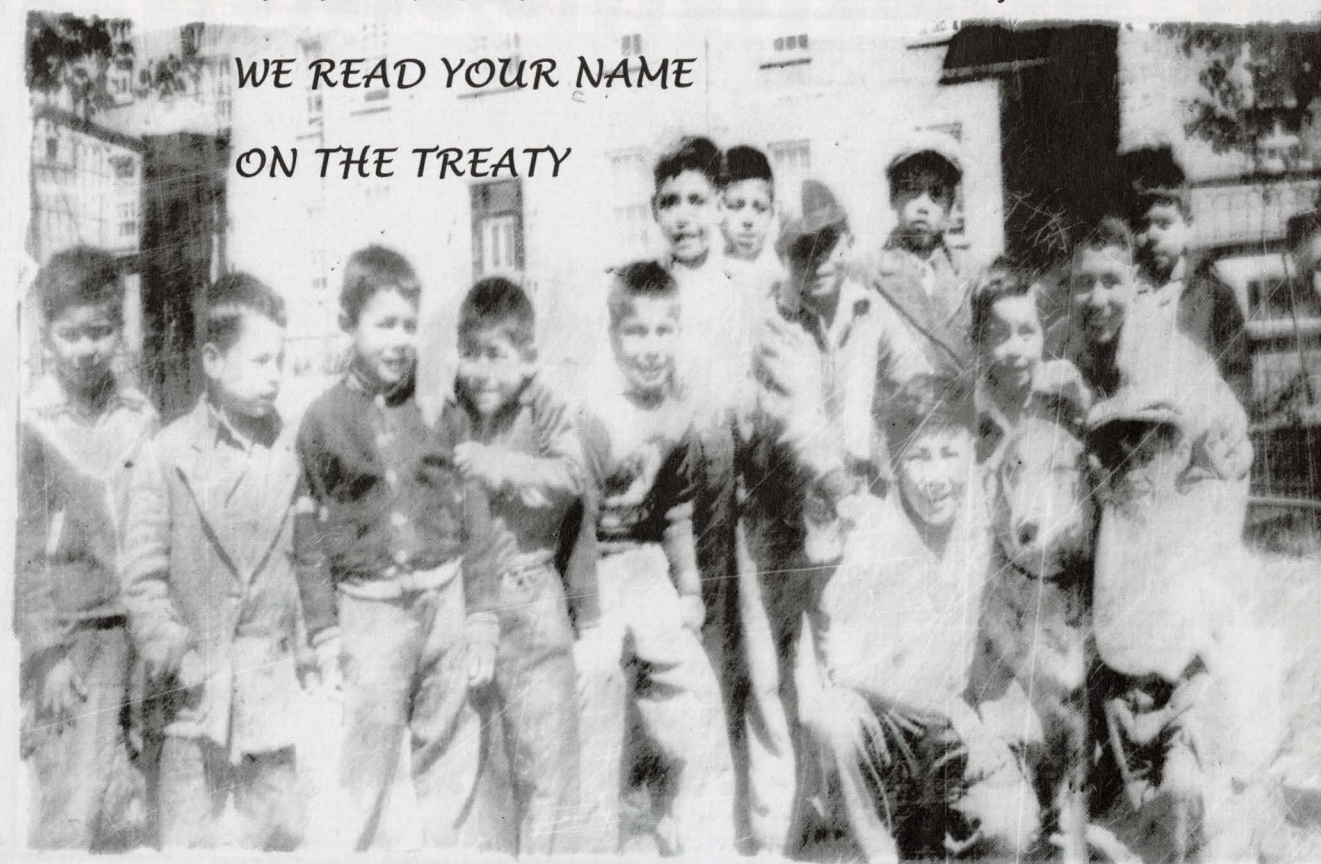
DEAR YOUR MAJESTY,  
MAY I SPEAK WITH YOU?  
I HAVE A QUESTION  
ABOUT CROWN LAND



DEAR YOUR HONOUR,  
DESPITE REPEATED REQUESTS

WE STILL HAVE NOT SEEN YOUR DEED  
OR TITLE  
TO THE TERRITORY IN QUESTION





DEAR CHIEF,  
THERE MUST HAVE BEEN A MISTAKE,  
WE READ YOUR NAME  
ON THE TREATY

TELL US,  
WHERE SHALL WE GATHER TO REDRESS THIS,  
AND WHEN?



# The gentrification of gentrification

## and other strategies of Toronto's creative class

by Adrian Blackwell

"When I first walked into the Drake in the summer of 2001, it was part flop-house and part crack house. I fell in love with the historic spiral staircase — the centrepiece of the main lobby. I was struck by this touch of glamour in an otherwise seedy establishment. A perfect starting point, I thought, to create a democratic hub and cultural pathfinder, in the midst of a re-energized indie art gallery district."<sup>1</sup>

— Jeff Stober, owner and developer of the Drake Hotel

*There Goes the Neighbourhood* was a forum held at Toronto's Harbourfront Centre in the spring of 2005 to discuss gentrification in the context of the current development of Toronto's downtown neighbourhoods. The panel of invited speakers included: Susan Serran, director of Arts Programs and Services for Artscape, a non-profit organization dedicated to improving production space for artists that develops properties for reasonable rents; Rosemary Donegan, Toronto historian, curator and professor at the Ontario College of Art and Design; Lisa Rochon, writer and architecture critic for the *Globe and Mail*; and myself. The forum's mission statement implicated "artists and culture workers" as both agents and victims of these changes — acting as "indicator[s] of [an area's] cultural attractiveness," while often being priced out of the very "neighbourhoods that they have helped to establish."<sup>2</sup>

In response to the broad questions around the intersection of processes of *gentrification*, *local community* and *cultural activity*, panelists fell into different camps distinguished by their divergent definitions of these three terms. Lisa Rochon focused on the plight of artists displaced from gentrifying areas and on innovative solutions for producing artists' live/work space. Susan Serran cautioned against being overly critical of gentrification, arguing that we need to embrace change in order to produce a more creative city. Rosemary Donegan considered the relationship between artists and the neighbourhoods they have inhabited, privileging the complex fabric of the city over a simplified understanding of artist's requirements. And I argued that the class-defined process of gentrification destroys the potential for local communities made up of both artists and non-artists to produce diverse and meaningful culture.

These significant discursive differences produced a fractured dialogue of dissonant trajectories: *gentrification* defined as revitalization or modernization versus predatory displacement; *community* as the "creative community" on the one hand and a broad group of residents on the other; and *cultural activities* produced as cultural capital for the global economy against the local practices of existing residents. This, at times dysfunctional, conversation worked best as an illustration of the gulf that today divides cultural workers who appear at first glance to share many similar desires and intentions.

Over the last few years, North America has followed Europe in its realization that culture can function as a stimulus for urban development, and local governments are taking notice. *The Creative Spaces and Places* conferences initiated by Artscape, held twice in Toronto over the last three years, piggy-back on the popularity of Richard Florida's book *The Rise of the Creative Class*, arguing for the expediency of culture in contemporary urban politics. Florida argues that there is a clear statistical correlation between concentrations of bohemian communities and sites of profitability in the high technology industries that are at the forefront of the North American economy. This statistical resonance has given

leverage to many groups interested in locating funding for culture, and as a result the concept of the "creative class" holds currency in the municipal politics of competitive cities. By highlighting the importance of art in a political realm, where it had until recently been losing value, Florida's arguments hold out great promise. At the same time, including cultural questions in discussions of urban change has the potential to substantially redefine culture itself. Perhaps what is at stake is contained in a question once posed by Walter Benjamin: is this an example of the emancipatory practice of politicizing aesthetics or of a regressive attempt to aestheticize politics?<sup>3</sup>

In the move towards the professionalization and empowerment of the arts in the urban scene, what kind of new mutually supportive relationships between art and local communities might be possible? Is the role of art primarily to stimulate economic growth with deleterious social effects, or is culture to be considered first as that complex lattice of diverse practices required to produce healthy social spaces from which new economic opportunities will follow? The answers to these questions are tied up in the stumbling block of gentrification, a concept that makes many downtown residents uncomfortable and a practice whose apparent inevitability inspires feelings of resignation amongst artists.

### 1. Gentrification Effects What's wrong with gentrification?

The word "gentrification" was developed by British sociologist Ruth Glass in 1964 to describe the makeover of city space inhabited by one class of people by another, more affluent, class. It was used to describe the process of turning working-class neighbourhoods into places for the gentry.<sup>4</sup> Over the last forty years, this clear definition has been refashioned as an ambiguous term that describes the slow improvement, revitalization or rebuilding of downtown neighbourhoods. In the process it has been cleansed of its literal focus on the issue of class and its localization in space. In what



geographer Neil Smith has called the gentrification of language,<sup>5</sup> right-wing ideologues have invested heavily in discrediting Glass' definition in an effort to disengage the transformative profit-generating aspects of gentrification from its predatory social processes. In North America, where many people believe the hard divisions of class were transcended long ago, and the right to own property acts as the founding principle for urban development, it has been possible to naturalize gentrification under the complex phenomena of urban change, where positive developments carry with them a few unavoidable side effects. The genius of this linguistic turn is that it allows people to frame development as disinterested revitalization, while implying the original meaning of gentrification at the same time. It names a process, defined not only by the desire to physically improve urban space in decline, but also to empty it of the stain of poverty. The gentrified term is perfect for Canadian politesse, stating one thing officially, yet suggesting exactly its opposite beneath the surface.

#### Drivers of gentrification: the value of land and inter-urban competition

While clarifying the term's definition provides us with a crucial linguistic tool for attacking regressive forms of urban development, it is not self-evident that all forms of downtown development constitute clear processes of gentrification. Many are complex processes with motivations and effects that must be unpacked. The fight against gentrification is not about resisting change but guiding it in a direction that improves living conditions for local residents.

Beyond this struggle over language and ideology are the mechanisms by which gentrification operates. Neil Smith argues that gentrification is driven by forces of capital at two distinct scales: the "rent gap" at the local scale and the competition between cities at the global scale. A rent gap, a significant difference between current ground rent, reflected in the price of property, and the potential ground rent under a changed situation of use, is the primary local mechanism for gentrification.

This differential is the basis for extracting profit in real estate speculation. It can be manufactured through the depreciation of land prices in a specific area due to landlord or municipal neglect, or through appreciation due to changed zoning, infrastructure improvements or the increased value of adjacent property. When driven by depreciation, the displacement caused by gentrification is the second part of a double humiliation, following on the heels of divestment and disrepair in a declining market.

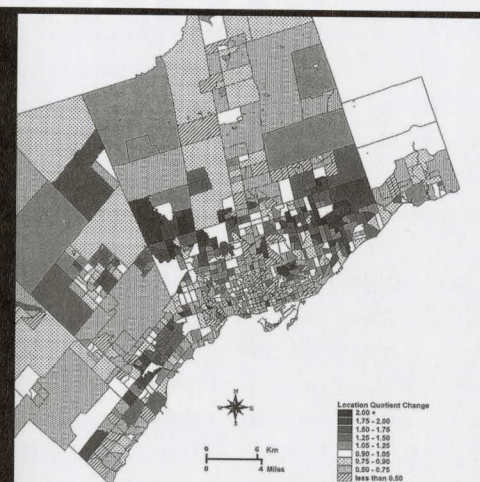


Figure 3. Changes in location quotients for manufacturing workers, 1971–91.

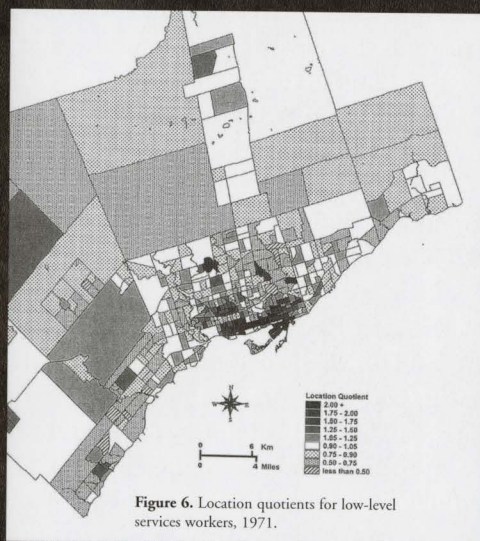


Figure 6. Location quotients for low-level services workers, 1971.

Toronto's current transformations are driven by both factors. Declining amenity for industrial tenants and the wear and tear on the historic fabric of working class neighbourhoods depreciated ground rents in areas adjacent to the downtown, causing landlords to forgo investment and await the greater profits available through redevelopment. In response, the city transformed land uses in the core in the mid 1990s, allowing residential and commercial functions in former industrial zones. In a project colloquially known as the "Two

Kings" for its axis along King Street, industrial areas east and west of downtown were rezoned to mixed uses under the guidance of Mayor Barbara Hall and Chief Planner Paul Bedford. This change increased land value in these areas, spurring a real estate development boom in the downtown. Many small businesses and low-income tenants were evicted, to allow for renovations and upgrade, while others simply moved away as rents skyrocketed. At the same time, the public spaces of the neighbourhood changed until its recognizable spaces and forms were rendered entirely unfamiliar.

This process of redevelopment and the municipal policies that enabled it are not only the result of local development forces, but also of contemporary global processes: changing labour relations in a world market, radically improved telecommunications networks, their counterintuitive geographic centralization in urban spaces, and the move from industrial to financial investment as the driver of developed economies. Saskia Sassen has characterized these changes as reconfiguring the globe from a set of adjacent territories into a system of global cities, functioning as command and control centres for the global economy.<sup>6</sup> This change has made cities forms to be consumed, creating a new emphasis on the diverse qualities and affective experiences of leisure spaces and professional workplaces, rather than on the post-war demand for the accumulation of commodities that suburban expansion provided.

The abandonment of public funding for housing by national and provincial governments in the early 1990s marked a shift in emphasis that helped to increase potential ground rent in urban areas, encouraging the transformation of Canada's largest downtowns at the hands of foreign capital: Vancouver's False Creek development and Toronto's CityPlace were both developed by Concord Adex, a subsidiary of Lee Ka-shing's Hong Kong-based Cheung Kong. Canada is not, however, simply subject to capital from abroad. Local developers such as Toronto's Olympia and York pioneered immense downtown gentrification projects in New York's Battery Park City and London's Canary Wharf.

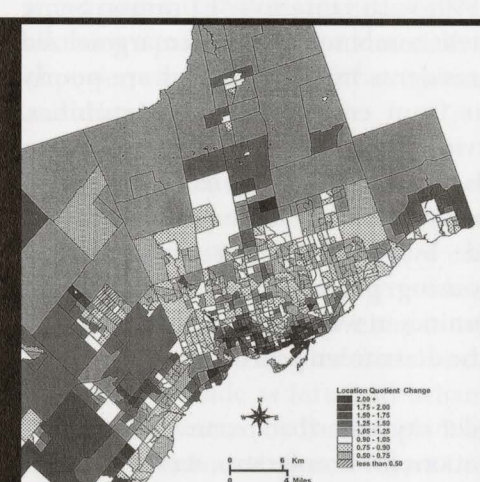


Figure 5. Changes in location quotients for professional workers, 1971–91.

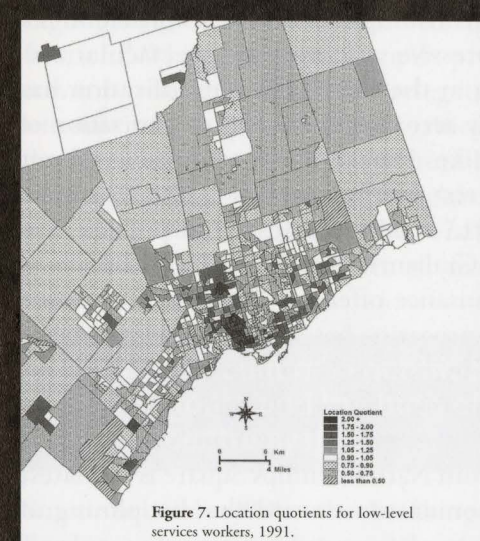


Figure 7. Location quotients for low-level services workers, 1991.

Maps reprinted from Allan Walks' "The Social Ecology of the Post-Fordist/Global City?" *Urban Studies* 38:3 (2001), pp. 407–447.



These projects act as evidence for gentrification as an increasingly lucrative strategy for capital accumulation, at moments when investment in commodity production tends toward a lower rate of return. In light of these local and global processes, gentrification takes on a meaning well beyond a subjective phenomenon driven by the tastes and predilections of individuals. More clearly, it is shown to be the result of changing circumstances and locations of profitability within worldwide real estate markets.

### Spatial trajectories: local homogenization and social polarization

According to many local accounts, Toronto appears to be emerging into a spectacular cultural renaissance. Key architectural additions to local museums and schools by prominent architects, a new opera house, thriving commercial art districts and world-renowned festivals of film and literature all serve as evidence of tremendous changes. At the same time, news reports create the impression of a downward spiral of violent crime concentrated largely in the dispersed spaces of Toronto's mature high-density suburbs. These contradictory aspects of Toronto's current development should be understood as related effects of gentrification processes. On the one hand, gentrification has involved the physical reorganization of poverty and affluence within the Greater Toronto Area. This process has consolidated wealth in strategic areas of professional services, consumption and amenity, while concentrating poverty in fabric fragmented by industrial, warehousing and logistical infrastructure. On the other hand, gentrification is a tool in an ideological battle, remaking visible areas of the central city to create the image of a new more affluent city of leisure, while hiding marginal spaces from view.

In his study of the "social-ecology of the post-Fordist/global city," geographer Allan Walks makes it clear that Toronto was already much more spatially segregated by class in 1991 than it was in 1971.<sup>7</sup> In the restructuring of the 1970s and 80s, unionized indus-

trial workers either lost their jobs and moved into service jobs, or if they remained employed in industry they tended to move out of the city proper into more distant exurban municipalities. During this same period, low-income service workers moved into those parts of the mature suburbs that industrial workers left behind. For their part, professional workers flooded previously working-class spaces downtown (see maps by Allan Walks). If this process was well underway in the 1970s and 1980s, it accelerated rapidly in the 1990s with Ontario's "Common Sense Revolution." These combined processes marginalized many Toronto residents in enclaves that are poorly serviced and far from employment opportunities. Low-income service workers are now concentrated in neighbourhoods that are separated from the rest of the city by highways, railways and ravines and internally fractured by a modernist urbanism of autonomous housing projects. This has produced enclosed communities in ways that the connected and open streets of the downtown grid do not.

So while high-density suburban zones function by default as reservations for immigrants, service workers and an unemployed labor reserve, Toronto's downtown is steadily changing from an ethnically and economically diverse space of cultural production into a homogeneous zone of consumption. This transformation is a war of both repressive strategies and spectacular aesthetics. Starting in the early 1990s, gentrification has been increasingly accompanied by the militarization of city streets. Mike Harris' provincial government reduced its interest in urban policy to the repressive "Safe Streets Act," following closely on policies pioneered by Rudy Giuliani in New York City with his zero tolerance for nuisance offences. This hostile attitude towards urban precarity has been reinforced at the municipal level by new policies of overtime policing, and a vigilant monitoring of vagrancy in downtown parks. The recent proposal to remove homeless Torontonians from Nathan Philips Square is the latest move in the momentum toward the disciplining of urban space.

However, every bad cop needs a good cop, so the corollary of the intensification of state violence in the city has been increased attention to the situation's optics. Recent interest in urban design and architecture is part of a process of making cities look good. The shift in zoning policy in the 1990s from modernist techniques of density and land use controls to a complete reliance on design guidelines, regulating form through height and setback limitations, is just one of many changes that have reoriented urban development toward appearances. These regulations operate ideologically, allowing a partial reality to materially dominate spaces of power, while the rest of the city remains untouched and abandoned.

If gentrification operates as a mature process in early twenty-first century Toronto, it remains to be seen how its processes will evolve as it consumes the city beyond the centre, colonizing new low-income neighbourhoods. So far, it is traveling northwest along the rail corridor, as former industrial sites adjacent to the tracks are remade as lofts and urban townhomes. A 2003 report written by Dr. Pamela Blais and published by the Neptis Foundation, a Smart Growth think tank based in Toronto,<sup>8</sup> has called attention to the poorest suburbs of Toronto, ironically claiming these densest of urban spaces as regions with excess capacity and highlighting them as potential sites for future intensification.<sup>9</sup> While the study happily projects attention toward areas that have been relegated to the urban unconscious, it does so without critically assessing the displacement that might result from aggressive development of these low-income neighbourhoods by the real estate market, raising the terrifying spectre of gentrification in Toronto's most marginalized suburban spaces.

### 2. The role of culture in gentrification Reform Toronto and the birth of the of the artist-run centre system

Since the early 1970s, the breaking point between Fordist and post-Fordist models of production, art

infrastructures have gone through a set of transformations. In the 1960s, funding for the arts that began at the federal level in 1957 with the creation of the Canada Council was reevaluated to respond more closely to the demands and needs of practicing artists through "soundings" with the community. This process resulted in the initiation of artists-in-residence and short-term grants, the creation of the Art Bank and funding for "parallel" galleries, or artist-run centres, by the mid-1970s.<sup>10</sup> Much of the diversity and critical energy of Canada's art production since then can be seen as resulting from the limited autonomy afforded to artistic practices by these programs and other grants at the provincial and municipal levels.

The rise from the 1960s to the 1970s of a vocal community of artists expressing politicized demands coincides with the politicization of city spaces in Canadian urban centres. In Toronto, the 1970s mark the rise of demands for the preservation of downtown neighbourhoods. A broad coalition of Toronto residents including councilors like John Sewell, urban social critics like Jane Jacobs and architects like Jack Diamond and Barton Myers all argued for a moratorium on the construction of high-rise modernist housing projects on the east side of Toronto's core and the cancellation of the Spadina Expressway that would have overrun the Annex. These successful battles over urban space were part of a complex reorientation of urbanization toward the city, a shift that was radical in its concern for the agency of existing neighbourhoods and communities, but reactionary in its strategies of "white painting" and urban cleansing. With their architecturally innovative low-rise, medium-density "infill" urbanism, architects like Diamond and Myers tried to densify housing, while respecting the form of existing neighbourhoods. They produced some of the most innovative public housing projects of the period, such as Sherbourne Lanes and Hydro Block, while also renovating the existing fabric of Yorkville to produce York Square and helping to turn the neighbourhood from the counter-cultural scene it was then to the centre of consumption it is today.



As the Canadian focus on landscape painting, and its sublimation in abstract expressionism, gave way to more experimental practices of video, performance, film and architecture, artistic practices in Toronto were also urbanized. These incorporated the demands of women, homosexuals and class struggle through radical institutions such as *The Body Politic*, A Space, the Kensington Arts Association, The Funnel and many other new artist-run centres. These groups used the city as a laboratory. One of the most radical, the Centre for Experimental Arts and Communication (CEAC), was in 1977 the first artist run centre in Canada to buy a building to use as an experimental centre for video production, seminars, performances and screenings. In a 1973 article in *The Body Politic*, "hetero-burbia," Amerigo Marras, one of CEAC's founders, argued polemically that the suburbs operated as an intense apparatus of socio-sexual control, repressing communication between strangers. The corollary of his argument was that urban space afforded a sufficient combination of adjacency and anonymity, liberating new social potentials from existing societal structures.

Just as the 1970s emphasis on urban values in municipal politics stemmed from an alliance between conservatives, liberals and activists, the construction of an urban infrastructure of alternative art institutions, with funding from national, provincial and municipal governments, was also a process that aligned contradictory motivations. In her 1986 history of CEAC, Dot Tuer argued that the 1970s in Toronto were a time of radical discussion over the role of culture in society. Art's complicity with spectacular media and capitalist control was questioned by artists from Marxist, feminist, anarchist and autonomist perspectives. However, much of the energy behind these debates was suddenly cut short in the late 1970s after *The Body Politic*'s offices were raided by the RCMP and CEAC had its public funding cancelled as a result of its public support for the Italian Red Brigade in its publication *STRIKE magazine*. The arts community suddenly saw its own fortunes tightly bound to its access to public grants. This realization provoked a reactionary turn within artist-run centres, which began looking

inward towards their own cultural struggles, rather than linking outward with like-minded social movements. The 1980s saw a turn from experimental practices toward the art market and traditional media like sculpture and painting.<sup>11</sup> This move away from the radical critique of culture did not provoke a move away from urban spaces by arts organizations, but it slowly changed the relationship they held with the city.

Municipal urban policies followed a similar trajectory toward privatization. The 1972 election of David Crombie's "reform council" in Toronto had focused the problem of urban regeneration on the provision of affordable housing through the "Mayor's Task Force on Housing." The most substantial result of the city's initiative was the St. Lawrence neighbourhood, a radical reversal of modernist public housing precedents. It was the first large-scale development in Canada to attempt to create a mixed income community, containing different tenures of housing and integrated with the fabric of the surrounding city. However, St. Lawrence stands as an isolated example, since no projects of similar ambition have been undertaken since. In 1992, Brian Mulroney's conservative government cut the cooperative housing programme; by 1993 the federal government stopped funding new housing; and then upon election in 1995, Mike Harris' conservative government completely cut public housing in Ontario, rendering the redevelopment of urban spaces an entirely free-market affair. This move finally left the city at the mercy of the forces of development, and by the late 1990s the municipal government was pursuing a project of gentrification with abandon, through its rezoning policies, planning approvals and aggressive policing.

#### Art as symbolic legitimation and the creative class as class discrimination

As Hans Haake has long argued through his sculptural practice, art is often asked to function as cultural legitimation for the most unsavory techniques of capitalist accumulation. Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Ryan's 1984

essay "The Fine Art of Gentrification" firmly directs this argument towards the gentrification of urban spaces, through an analysis of the overheated art market of the early 1980's on Manhattan's Lower East Side. Confirming Neil Smith's insistence that the ideological project of gentrification involves the construction of a wild and uninhabited frontier, Deutsche and Ryan deconstruct the aestheticization of dangerous urban space in the neo-expressionist work of many Lower East Side artists.<sup>12</sup> This process of othering is palpable in Jeff Stober's description of his own first discovery of the Drake Hotel in Toronto as a "seedy establishment...part flophouse and part crack house." In this narrative he self-identifies as yet another progressive urban pioneer attempting to restore value to historic urban spaces, while displacing housing for low-income criminals. This unsavory story might simply appear ridiculous to street-smart artists, were it not for the other half of Stober's argument: the new Drake will become a "democratic hub and cultural pathfinder, in the midst of a re-energized indie art gallery district." With the notable exception of the place's democratic qualities, this last sentence has been realized. The Drake has become a cultural centre on Queen Street, acting as a catalyst for other restaurants and bars and a marketing tool for adjacent condominium development.

Despite its large size in relation to most other entertainment developments along this section of Queen West, the Drake remains a relatively small player in the local real estate market. Projects such as the Candy Factory at Queen and Shaw, recent development along King from Strachan to Sudbury and the proposed redevelopment of the Queen Street Mental Health Centre, are the real drivers of urban regeneration here. However, the Drake brings with it what these other developments do not, the symbolic capital to draw the arts community on-side with the area's gentrification. In his own narrative Stober uses culture as surplus legitimation: not only will the area be cleaned up, free of crime and poverty, but better still it will have cultural value. By buying into the Drake's aggressive courtship

through its artist-in-residency programs, music, lecture, performance and projection events, its in-house exhibitions, video programming in private hotel rooms and sponsorship of Power Plant events, the artistic community cynically validates the process of displacement at work in the neighbourhood. The Drake's program appears as a perverse inversion of CEAC's laboratory for the interrogation and refusal of societal forms of spectacular control.

Richard Florida's contemporary ideology of the creative class also inverts the 1970s identification of certain art workers with class struggle. Consisting of a broad group of arts, information, scientific research and financial workers, the creative class is always in search of the right living context. Talented and mobile, they will travel great distances to find a metropolis with the requisite cultural amenities. While Florida warns followers to be aware of the negative "externalities" lodged within creative cities — socio-economic polarization, high cost of housing and the resultant displacement of those creative people unlucky enough to form part of that class — he insists these crises are not structural, but are rather irrational deviations that can and must be solved within the theory. Unfortunately these externalities tend to disappear from sight as "Creative City" logic is taken up by municipal governments as a way of making their cities more competitive, and by arts organizations interested in wrestling scarce funding from governments and private donors. Florida's emphasis on the economics of his argument allows readers to focus on dollar signs, rather than side effects.

Artscape has jumped aboard Florida's creative cities train as an opportunity to further their agenda of serving and promoting artistic producers in the city. Like many arts organizations forced to accept an entrepreneurial model under the rubric of neo-liberalism, Artscape projects its activities in terms of their potential to intensify economic growth. After completing their building at 60 Atlantic Avenue in the heart of Liberty Village, Artscape claimed that "[t]his largely abandoned industrial area quickly became a hot spot for artists,



designers, filmmakers, and new media enterprises.”<sup>13</sup> In this proud description of their role as catalyst for the gentrifying effects of subsequent developments, they are deliberately silent on the fact that many affordable artists’ studios were lost in the conversion of inexpensive industrial space to high-rent office space.

To ramp up their own activities in a political climate curious about the potential of culture, Artscape recently hosted the second installment of *Creative Places and Spaces — The Risk Revolution*, “a conference dedicated to unlocking the creative potential of people and places through innovative initiatives.”<sup>14</sup> The danger imbedded in the fervour of Artscape’s creative boosterism, in a city suffering from intense social polarization, is that the creative class will be reified as an exploitive social group, with artists fixed as the spectacular service class for the attraction of elite professionals in high tech and media sectors. In a creative city, profitable creativities are privileged, as a result the creative class is subsidized, while other producers are not. The creative class here plays out Amerigo Marras’ argument of thirty years ago, “The artist defends the privilege and the entrenchment he/she holds in a capitalist society.”<sup>15</sup>

### New directions for creative inquiry

The irony of the creative class is that most artists are bottom feeders, making little money from their craft. While many come from middle-class backgrounds, are relatively privileged, and can afford to risk years of their lives in anonymity, a large number are not and bravely forge a practice in situations of much greater precarity. Most remain objectively poor while working as artists. For this reason, the promise of the creative class in its colloquial usage is another strategy designed to divide the poor into haves and have-nots, giving small doses of privilege to some, at the expense of others, as a way of undermining class-consciousness. In their collaborative works, political philosophers Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have discovered a similar group of “social workers,” exploited participants in an increasingly communicative and globalized labour pool, but

they argue for a very different class allegiance for these workers, as elements of an exploited multitude of the waged and unwaged. For Hardt and Negri the social worker is not at the top of a power structure, but rather remains subject to the alienating structures of control in a world of postmodernization, and as such has to shake her or his sense of privilege and find solidarity with other exploited workers.<sup>16</sup>

There are many different kinds of artistic practices that try to think creatively about the city without prioritizing creative change over local communities. Last fall, Morton Goll and Tone Nielson created the *Niagara Falls Artist Host Program* at Mercer Union. It was an ambitious project that attempted to link new immigrant artists with no connections to Toronto’s art scene to downtown artists through a buddy system, an art exhibit of the works of both groups and a series of events with No One is Illegal, an activist organization fighting for the rights of immigrants. The project inverted the distancing dynamic of gentrification, by connecting poor immigrants and longtime residents in a productive collaboration sharing knowledge and power. Given Toronto’s current concentrations of new immigrant spaces and spaces of poverty in mature high density suburbs, the project created a linking device between high-profile gentrifying spaces and those marginalized spaces that populations have been relegated to. A similar project realized last year by the Art Gallery of Ontario’s teen council called Metro-A-Go-Go brought local artists in contact with youth at community centres across the GTA to work on collaborative projects focused on their localities, bringing youth downtown and artists into the nether reaches of the city.

Regent Park Focus, a program intended to keep youth away from addictive drugs in Toronto’s oldest housing project, has created a radical training ground for youth media — producing video, a newspaper, a radio show, and local photography. The project aims to transform a neighbourhood from within, improving local access to information and education, focusing on the empowerment of a community threatened by displacement.

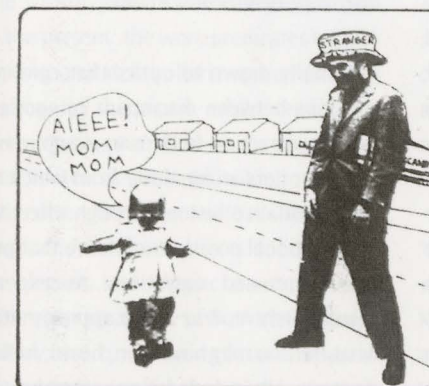
Finally, The Toronto School of Creativity & Inquiry is an autonomous working group, organizing public forums and exhibitions. It has focused on the precarity of work in contemporary flexible economies, food security, the privatization of the university, contemporary transformative tactics and mapping globalization. This organization, working from both an academic and aesthetic perspective, often in collaboration with the Toronto Free Gallery in the east end, works to politicize aesthetics through an experiment in public discourse, at a moment when the city as a whole is privatizing public and counter-public spheres through processes of gentrification.

Through creative city rhetoric artists are being empowered to consider their effects on the transformation of the city. In order to fight the class-defined displacement and polarization that is the result of gentrification, artists have to find models of solidarity with urban communities outside their own solipsistic enclaves. In that choice they define the character of their practice and participate in forming the city around them. This means not arguing for the rights of artists alone, or for a creative city as an end in itself, but rather understanding that it is precisely the city’s complexity in terms of class, race and culture that provides the foundation for those possibilities of substantive artistic experimentation and creativity that do exist.

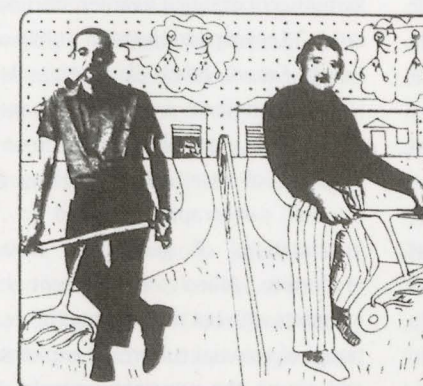
Adrian Blackwell is an artist and urban and architectural designer whose work focuses on the uneven development of contemporary urbanization. This fall he participated in the Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism/Architecture. With Jen Budney, Blackwell co-edited *Unboxed: engagements in social space, a book of lectures and projects by artists working between the disciplines of architecture and performance*. He teaches urban design and architecture at the University of Toronto.

### Notes:

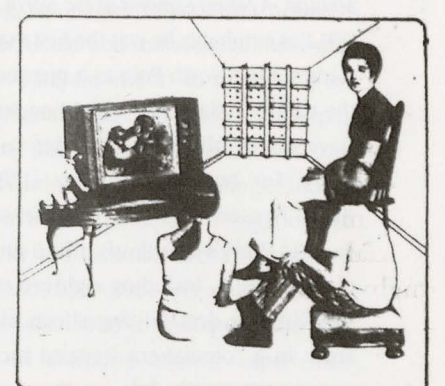
1. Jeff Stober, “Our story” (<http://www.thedrakehotel.ca/ourstory.asp>).
2. View Points: *There Goes the Neighbourhood* was co-produced by Harbourfront Centre and Fuse Magazine and held at Harbourfront Centre on 7 April 2005. Quotes are from a press release issued by Harbourfront 31 March 2005.
3. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p. 242.
4. Neil Smith *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 33.
5. Ibid.
6. See Saskia Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).
7. Allan Walks, “The Social Ecology of the Post-Fordist/Global City? Economic Restructuring and Socio-spatial Polarisation in the Toronto Urban Region” *Urban Studies* 38:3 (2001), pp. 407–447.
8. The Neptis Foundation’s executive director is Anthony Coombs, an architect and urbanist instrumental in the creative reconstruction of global urban space through gentrification, in New York through Battery Park City and in London at Canary Wharf.
9. Pamela Blais “The Growth Opportunity” a report published by the Neptis Foundation for consideration by the Central Ontario Smart Growth Panel established by the Government of Ontario and entitled the Growth Opportunity.
10. <http://www.canadacouncil.ca/aboutus/history/>
11. Dot Tuer, “The ceac was banned in Canada” in *C Magazine* 11 (1986), pp. 22–37.
12. Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Gendel Ryan, “The Fine Art of Gentrification,” *October* 31 (1984), pp. 91–111.
13. <http://www.torontoartscape.on.ca/history/>
14. <http://www.torontoartscape.on.ca/cps/>
15. Tuer, p. 24.
16. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 402.



Children are trained to mistrust everybody, they belong to the nuclear family AMEN!



The lack of physical barriers hides instead a wall of fear and hate: nobody embraces his/her neighbours.



Single family houses remind one of the pattern of prison cells sharing the same conformity and TV set.

Amerigo Marras, “Hetero-burbia,” reprinted from *The Body Politic* 7 (Winter 1973), p. 25.



# True North, Brave and Free: Isaac Julien's *True North*

Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal (touring)  
8 October 2004 – 9 January 2005

review by Warren Chrichlow

To be entombed in ice, to freeze as you walk or to drop from starvation is all in the game. Death can come from a hundred directions at once in that frozen waste. But there is glory locked in that icy hell, and my soul will never give me peace until it is mine.

— Matthew Henson

Eschewing factual composition of its subject, Isaac Julien's film installation *True North* (2004), an epigrammatic inquiry, is conceptually and aesthetically motored by the imaginary. Comprised as a triptych projection and accompanied by a series of colour photographic "stills," *True North* provides neither fetishized documentary nor readily accessible docudrama of the early twentieth century African American explorer, Matthew A. Henson (1866 – 1955). While his role is contested in "official" histories, Henson's autobiographical account, *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole* (1912) is emphatic: he was the first man to stand on the North Pole as a member of the controversial 1909 expedition led by Navy survey officer Commander Robert Peary. For twenty-three years (1887 – 1909) Henson was the "indispensable man" to Peary's relentlessly driven project of exploration, including eighteen years surviving the destabilizing effects of the arctic in a colonial-era frenzied race to possess the North Pole — the dream-

world marker for modernity and empire.

Reminiscent of Julien's earlier "documentaries," *Looking for Langston* (1989) and *Frantz Fanon: Black Skin, White Mask* (1996), *True North* is less an homage to Henson than a complex meditation on his narrative of race, nation-building and colonial cartography centered in the machinations of gender in Western modernity. Julien's engagement here intersects with but then rewrites other critiques of colonial cultures of exploration and power, the prescient example, Lisa

Bloom's study of scientific evolutionism, colonization and rationalist conceptions of discovery, *Gender on Ice* (1993).

Habitually drawn to optics that connect relations between discrepant categories, Julien's attraction to Henson is apparent: Henson offers an ideal site from which to re-territorialize history through affective and relational occasions of desire that pry open repressed narratives. As experimental archive, *True North* approximates what Henson *may* have seen, heard, hallucinated — to include his ephemeral mus-



All images Isaac Julien, *True North Series* (Untitled) 2004, color photographs. Courtesy: Victoria Miro Gallery, London and Metro Pictures, New York



ings, both visual and spoken, during his arctic quest for modernity. These experiential fragments are reshuffled and re-presented as a genealogy for/in the present. The visual reverie shuns answers, teleological or otherwise. Through expressive visuals, art historical reference and the aesthetic drive of cultural and fictional entanglements, Julien employs his signature practice to enact a theoretically grounded form of querying or "queering," meant as both intervention and problematization of didactic cultural politics and nationalist or nativist ideologies.

*True North* is consistent with Julien's filmic and writerly oeuvre from the early 1980s to the present: the work predicated on disrupting and defamiliarizing complacent regimes of the visual, while simultaneously staging a critical mode of address that invites surprise, provoking thinking otherwise. Yet *True North* extends the implications of such effects. Julien offers an elegant and elegiac montage, animating the quagmire of both re-imagined history and conjecturing futures beyond the present — after the predicament of

our accumulating global tragedies.

Formally self-conscious and teeming with sumptuous visuals, the triptych begins with hypnotic dissolves, translations, montage and perspectival license. Infused with steely blue/white tones, the cinematographic images move, fracture and freeze across the three screens, offering opulent panoramic views endemic to the remote emptiness of a non-place. The multi-screen then fractures into a variety of images — an ice hotel interior, running reindeer, waterfalls, still portraits of "Henson" and his Inuit companions — that strengthen the formal compositional arrangement in shifting fantasy space. The soundscape — human footsteps, the crisp cut of a sledge through snow, whining dog teams, pulsating ambient electronic music and Inuit drumming and throat singing — sediments the work's affective response.

"Henson" is importantly figured as a woman who, like the loneliness of Zach Kunuk's "fast runner" (*Atanajurat* 2002), owns the perspective of a sovereign agent. Initially, the unidentified "protagonist"

appears as a ghostly mirage, later revealed as a stunning, statuesque black woman with closely cropped hair, dressed in white designer clothing. Through a series of quick dissolves she literally moves elegantly across time and between spaces that seamlessly transform into a snow covered, barren, arctic-like landscape.

The sequence concludes with the woman wearing a black-furred garment, its hood crowning her face close-up. Highly elevated, she stands and looks outward: resolute, defiant, and searching. Exhibiting familiarity with the terrain, she scans the North's white barren horizon with a look that defies the past. While the shot's dramatic composition evokes Casper David Friedrich nineteenth century landscape painting, *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1809), our figure-in-the-landscape disrupts normative understanding of the sublime. The three screens fracture again: she retains her panoramic view over the frozen tundra, now denaturalized by the contrasting blackness of her presence. From the top right screen she appears to watch herself trek off into the vanishing point of the northern horizon at the far-left screen's bottom edge.

*True North* procures an elliptical and poetic sensibility, enthralling and dislocating, its unique interactions between colour, image and sound signal the installation's haptic intent: to offer both an investigation and meditation on relations among pasts, presents and futures. The work continues the artist's long-standing aesthetic and political interrogations of identity and historical memory, territory and landscape, encounter and difference, all understood as constituent of the sublime in diasporic Atlantic experience, from colonial to post-colonial, from Africa





to the Arctic. Although direct quotation of Henson himself activates the voiceover, he remains an absent-presence, signaled by the black woman figure. Henson may be recognizable but he's in the wrong body, in the wrong place, in the wrong time. Such transgression, such trans-location, opens new potential to imagine our present.

The direct gaze of Henson's co-travelers, Ootah, Ooquanah, Seeglo and Engingwah, further elicits the critique of explorer-era images of Inuit and colonial ethnographies of indigenous peoples in general. The didacticism and competing claims that comprise "objective" accounts of "discovery" are sidestepped, although such narratives are quoted, they never circumscribe the aesthetic imaginary quality. Cinematic subtexts like Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922) remain oblique, making the corrective truths of conventional hagiography unnecessary. Julien's

transgressive visual counter-practice displaces the desired other story from the realm of redemption, nostalgia and the biographical. Rather, *True North*, through sound and montage, spins the silent, absent facts of the "real" Henson into a reflective site that cannot allow the positivism of "visible evidence" to enter.

Surpassing deconstruction, the aesthetic drive here decidedly probes history's in-between spaces, where insight is made accessible through the non-linearity of fantasy. While attempting to jettison the past, *True North* pushes the phantasmatic present and future through the collage-induced creolization of space. Shot on location in northern Sweden and Greenland, the reindeer of the Sami mingle with the huskies of the Inuit, and their presence blurs the ontological line that separates animal from human. The sovereign empty landscape suggests the precariousness of human life itself.

*True North's* transplanted protagonist (Vanessa Myrie, a veteran Julien collaborator (*Baltimore*, 2003)), is a marker for the cosmopolitan black diasporic subject. The antithesis of both Henson and the masculinist narrative of rationalist discovery and lust for power, she allegorizes possible futures, post-Peary, after the insecurities of the postcolonial present, the war on terror and our planetary environmental crisis. Yet Henson survived, he neither disappeared nor was he obliterated by his present. Like Henson, she exceeds erasure and appears immune to the polar terrain she resolutely trods. Through this black female figure Henson is contemporized, bringing the past into a present that morphs into an unrealized futurism. Both the future and the North Pole are, like identity, indeterminate and elusive and are not accessible

through rational systems of hierarchy and exclusion. Julien turns the scientific apparatus of the camera so central to polar exploration on its head, from rationality to fantasy, where instrumentation and science are impotent.

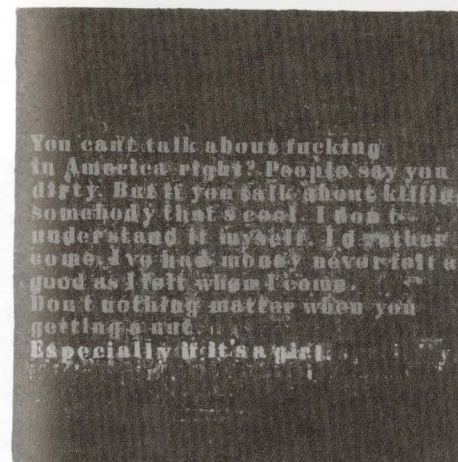
In the final sequence of the Julien film, the protagonist transcends, apparition-like, a symbolic Henson-past and the project of modernity into which he was conscripted. Issey Miyake-adorned and beautiful, she strides past two chunks of sea ice washed on to the shore, melting in the fading light. Henson and Peary, perhaps. While she reflects on what has happened, her soul is not locked in their icy hell. Here the narrative is mobile, constituted in fantasy and looking beyond history. She gazes into an unknown future that moves toward the horizon's vanishing point, always just beyond her reach; she re-thinks her past, a past that no longer dictates the present, though it nevertheless continues to haunt the landscape. In postcolonial terms the consequences of our modernity, rooted in the scientific rationality of discovery and conquest, maintains a virtual presence in everyday contemporary local life and geo-politics, imbuing global political economy with growing inequality fueled by uneven/under-development. The spectres of this terror hang over the present, making it impossible to imagine futures in ways that rely on nostalgic hopes. Working inbetween the fetishization of genres and the colonization of histories, Julien's *True North* attempts to create a visual experiment for thinking where it is not just what, but how we see that matters.

Warren Crichlow teaches cultural studies and education in the Faculty of Education at York University

## Unravelling the Image: "Glenn Ligon – Some Changes"

The Power Plant  
curated by Wayne Baerwaldt and Thelma Golden  
25 June – 5 September 2005

review by Victoria Lynn

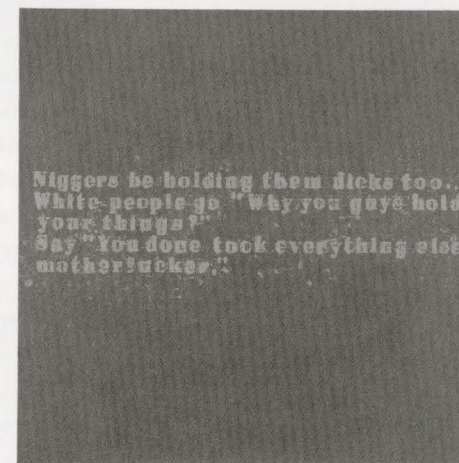


Glenn Ligon, *Especially If It's a Girl #1*, 2004, oilstick and acrylic on canvas, Courtesy: the artist and Regen Projects, Los Angeles

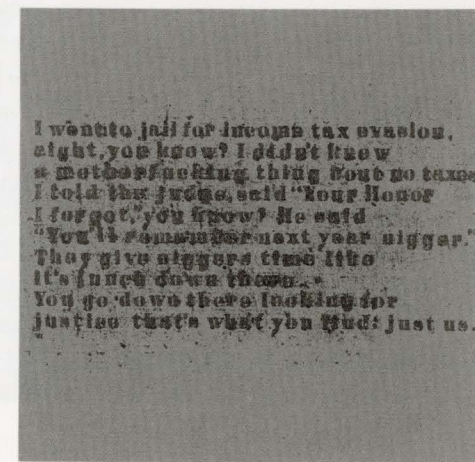
"Glenn Ligon – Some Changes" was an exhibition that spanned 17 years of the artist's practice and included paintings, works on paper, video, neon and an award-winning web project. Glenn Ligon is most well known for his text paintings — works that are resplendent with repeated phrases appropriated from famous and personally significant writers. Two features of Ligon's work stand out in this exhibition: first, the duration at play in these text paintings (the time it takes to unravel the image) and second, Ligon's creation of

his own archive of images and texts about black identity.

One of the most resonant phrases in Ligon's oeuvre is from Zora Neale Hurston: "I feel most coloured when I am thrown against a sharp white background." As the lines progress from top to bottom in Ligon's paintings, the words become increasingly illegible. The paintings cascade into an abstract, minimal field. Treated in this way, Hurston's phrase highlights Ligon's position as an African-American artist exhibiting in the white cube of the museum: he has been literally "thrown" up against the history of modernism encapsulated by this architectural form. As the words blur, however, a metaphor arises about the ways in which identities can change over time. It is not simply a question of the sharp contrast between black and white. Rather, the sense of duration in the paintings suggests



Glenn Ligon, *Cocaine (Pimps)*, 1993, oilstick and acrylic on linen, Collection of Emily Fisher Landau, New York



Glen Ligon, *Just Us #2*, 2004, oilstick and acrylic on canvas, on loan from The Latner Family Art Collection, Toronto



Niggers had the biggest dicks in the world and they was trying to find a place where they could have they contest. And they wasn't no fear, they didn't want everybody looking. So they walking around looking for a secret place. And they walked across the Golden Gate Bridge and the nigger seen that water and and made him wanna piss. One said "Man, I got to take a leak." And he pulled his thing out and was pissing. Other nigger pulled out his thing, took a piss. One nigger said "Goddamn, this water cold!" The other nigger say "Yeah, and it's deep too!"

Alot of niggers ain't scared, you know what I mean? I mean like when The Martians landed and shit white folks got scared, talkin about "Golly, I'll tell you. Just a big ole helicopter thing came down, landed. People got out had that fur all over their bodies big ole clay hands and shit. Jesus Christ."

Nothing can scare a nigger after 400 years of this shit

Left: Glenn Ligon, *Mudbone (Liar)*, 1993, Oilstick and acrylic on canvas, Collection of Raymond J. McQuire, New York, Courtesy: the artist  
Right: Glen Ligon, *Niggers Ain't Scared #1*, 1996, oilstick and acrylic on linen, Courtesy: the artist and Regen Projects, Los Angeles

the notion of change. Identity is not a fixed, intransigent and authentic entity, but fluctuates and reverberates with a multitude of differences and directions.

In Ligon's hands, Hurston's phrase comes to open the multiple meanings of the term colour. Indeed, Ligon deals as much with the colour of skin as he does with colour in painting. While the Ligon exhibition was on display at The Power Plant, the Art Gallery of Ontario featured an exhibition on the history of colour field painting. On the one hand, the contrast could not be more telling. While colour field painting emphasized the surface, the form and juxtaposition of colours to create a visually tremulous affect, Ligon paints in order to bring the world around him into the studio. As Darby English comments in the excellent catalogue: Ligon "paints in spite of the surface, treating its hallowed ground as a beginning rather than an end." Yet, there is an aspect of Ligon's painting that is indeed heir to modernist painting. The brightly coloured *Richard Pryor* paintings (pink on red, yellow on blue, purple on yellow) literally dance a kind of Op-art/Pop-art game with the viewer.

At another level, the Richard Pryor paintings also rely on duration: the time it takes to both read and "get" the joke. In addition, the gags raise a set of issues around the use of the word "nigger" in Black humour. When these works were displayed at the Whitney Museum of American Art in the 1990s they caused a sensation. Today, they seem tame, but no less funny. The indigenous Australian artist Destiny Deacon, who exhibited in the same documenta XI as Ligon, has used black "gollywog" dolls in her installations, videos and photographs since the 1990s. Ligon and Deacon's intentions are in parallel: they reclaim politically incorrect, archival cultural forms in order to forge a larger and more complex understanding of black identity.

In a very humorous sequence of photographs entitled *A Feast of Scraps* (1994–1998), Ligon has inserted images of male porn into a traditional family photo album. While engagements, weddings, birthdays and anniversaries are celebrated in group photos, sexualized images of naked men are labelled with typewritten phrases such as "mother knew" and

"daddy." Ligon's use of found imagery in this work, and in his web-based project, *Annotations*, 2003, underline the importance of the archive for him. The term derives from the Greek *arkheion*, meaning a public office where documents were filed. The archive is usually understood in its most official terms as those places where the nation's historical documents are kept secure — libraries, museums, galleries of art, film and sound collections. As such, the term is connected to the objective of preserving a nationalist

agenda. But archives are not only an engine of the state. American pop artist Andy Warhol created a personal archive. At the end of each day, he put all the materials from his desk — a day's thinking and working — into a box and preserved it for future reference. To create an assemblage of text and image, whether it be official or personal, is to embark on a strategy of montage. With Ligon, we have an example of a growing personal archive of images and texts. Through a minimal montage, Ligon creates a set of images

that are distinct from the "official line," even that of the family album.

Montage is perhaps the best way to describe the installation of this exhibition. The works were installed in a spacious and elegant way and one had the sense that curators Wayne Baerwaldt and Thelma Golden were extremely selective in their choices. A dual journey was created for the viewer: on one side of the gallery was an elegiac black and white group of works; on the opposite side, riotous colour. As the

negronsunshine

Glen Ligon, *Warm Broad Glow*, 2005, neon and paint, Courtesy: the artist and Regen Projects, Los Angeles



viewer criss-crossed between these two supposed opposites, a recombinant set of relations between the works arose.

"Negro Sunshine" (Gertrude Stein) is the phrase that features in a new and magnificent neon work entitled *Warm Broad Glow*. Mounted high on a wall, the front of the neon letters is black, so that the light is directed against the surface of the wall and the room is dim, rather than bright (Hurst's words also reverberate here).



Malcolm X

Glenn Ligon, *Malcolm X (Version 1) #1*, Silkscreen, Flashe paint on primed canvas, Courtesy: the artist and Regen Projects, Los Angeles

This is where Ligon demonstrates his talent: his ability to conjure so many associations with the most minimal and ephemeral of means. Light, dark, race, colour, black, white — these concepts collapse in on themselves in *Warm Broad Glow*... literally with the flick of a switch. Joseph Kosuth's conceptual word play or Barbara Kruger's subversive slogans are worth considering here. In a public forum with Huey Copeland held at the Harbourfront Centre, Ligon also cited the work of David Hammons as an influence. In an article Ligon wrote in *Artforum* (September 2004) he cites Hammons' installation *Concerto for Black and Blue*, where he says Hammons "figured out how to make light very black.... Process, ephemerality and transformation have always been part of Hammons' work. In a word: Lightness." In the same article, Ligon discusses Hammons' ambivalence about the term African-American. How can two words represent race? Ligon's own work asks the same: how can we describe the black body? Perhaps this is what underlies his appropriation of Stein's coupling, "Negro Sunshine."

Where are we from? What makes us? What is our history, our lineage, our identity and our trauma? Such questions form the basis of Ligon's work *Orange and Blue Feelings* (2003). While one room displays a group of school report cards on the young Ligon, another shows a two-screen video conversation between the artist and his real-life therapist (filmed from the neck down). Therapy is supposed to answer, or at least address, some of these questions. In this video, however, there is not much progress. Ligon (who is off-screen) discusses the loss of a painting en route to an

exhibition. The lost painting depicted Malcolm X with white skin, pink lipstick, blue eyebrows and two red beauty spots on his cheeks (it features on the catalogue cover). The painting was inspired by a drawing made by a child in a museum workshop. The child had been asked by Ligon to fill in an outline of Malcolm X's face. The video is partly about the spectre of the loss of painting and, for Ligon, the importance of finding painting. While the therapy session promises to interrogate the meanings of a lost Malcolm X, to embark on an exploration of the archive that is Glenn Ligon, it does not deliver. This is probably intentional, not as therapy, but as art — all of Ligon's works complicate meaning. Despite, or perhaps in spite of the hour-long duration, the video leaves one curiously empty, feeling, I surmise, a bit "orange and blue" — neither here nor there.

Ligon is at his best when he inhabits ideas that are in the world, thereby transforming them. In this sense his works are in process, they continually dematerialise and unravel both form and concept. This tension between text and abstraction is a pivot point that provides Ligon's work with its potency.

Victoria Lynn is an independent curator and writer based in Melbourne, Australia. A regular contributor to *UK Art Review* and *Art and Australia*, Lynn is also a distinguished curator, having held positions of director, creative development at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image, and curator, contemporary art, at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Victoria Lynn was Australian Commissioner for the Fiftieth Venice Biennale.

## Resistance Practices after Identity Politics: La Pocha Nostra's "The Other Coalition Forces"

Organised by Toronto Free Gallery, Sojin Chun of the Latino Canadian Cultural Association, and Amelia Jiménez in association with SAVAC and The Theatre Centre  
Toronto Free Gallery  
18 July – 23 July 2005

review by Irmgard Emmelhainz

"The Other Coalition Forces" was a collaborative community art ritual in which local artists reinterpreted and developed simultaneous performances within La Pocha Nostra laboratory. Artists from Kenya, El Salvador, South Africa, Mexico, India, Brazil, Korea and Canada shared their dislocated, hybrid identities. By producing dialogical actions with bodies,

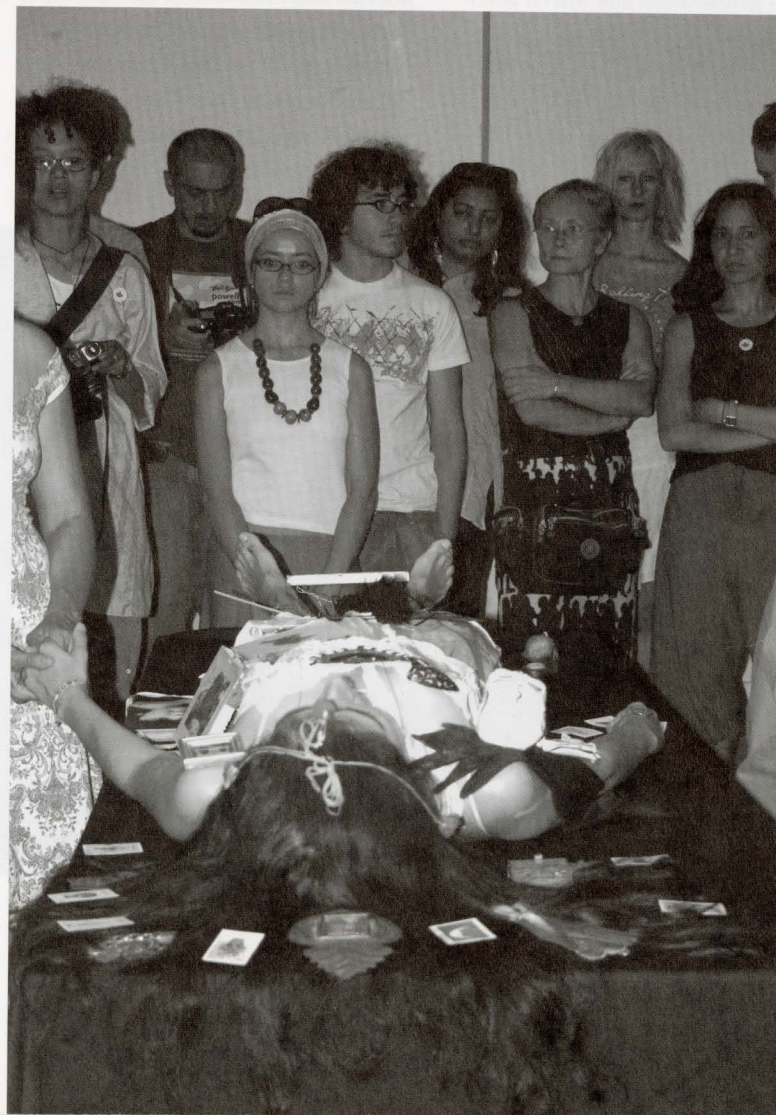
clothing, objects, language and the viewer and imbuing stereotypes with rebellious potential, the performances highlighted that identity is not essential but performative, in continuous flux and dialogical.

The performance and installation salon was the culmination of a weeklong workshop facilitated by members of La Pocha

Nostra collective, Guillermo Gómez Peña and Michèle Ceballos with twelve participating local artists. Most of the artists were first generation immigrants who took this opportunity to explore and interpret their own myths, fantasies and experiences of Canada. Performers' interpretations were mandated by the notions of: "No homeland; no fear; no borders; no patriotism; no nation-state; no ideology; and no censorship," and, within this framework, they together enacted the "Other Global Project."

The workshop set forth the conditions for an interactive archaeology of bodies, commodities, images and spaces that unsettle given assumptions — institutional and private — about identities, ethnicities and communities in order to undermine the ways in which these are deployed and marketed by dominant cultural institutions.

Originally from Mexico and based in San Francisco, Gómez Peña is one of the principal founding members of La Pocha Nostra, an ever morphing transdisciplinary arts organization that collaborates across borders, race and gender to create ephemeral communities connected by an agenda of negotiating difference. Using performance as a catalyst, La Pocha produces fluid communities that defy notions of identity, nationality and artmaking



Elysa Martinez, *The Other Coalition Forces*, Photo: Rob Gill, Courtesy: Toronto Free Gallery



through a method that cross-references popular culture, religious imagery and the visual and performing arts.<sup>1</sup>

Gómez Peña's earlier concern with the identity politics of being Mexican in California operated under the shamanic work of one of his personas, the "Border Brujo," the Frontera Wizard. Through juxtaposition and interaction, Gómez Peña's practice has not ceased to produce magical mimesis, fetishizing the signs that commodities, bodies and language may represent with the purpose of achieving catharsis by exploding the signifiers.

His practice has broadened to collaborations with artists and performers from around the globe, addressing the challenges of globalization and what it potentially and actually represents: migration, nomadism, hybrid identities, new strategies for political dissent, the internationalization of the division of labor, new technologies, mass-media, violence, sex,

virtual reality, cybernetics, the withering of national consciousnesses, etc.

The collective works to contest the power that symbols have in producing identities that are recognizable because of their mainstream representations. These representations produce ethnicities, nationalities or races (most of the time conflating all three), which entrap people in their skins to bear identities charged with stereotypes. Bodies, in this way, are marked and tagged by their mainstream representations then perpetuated by the complicit relationship between multiculturalism and consumer culture.

Bringing forth the revolutionary potential of manipulating one's own racial, communitarian and national representations, La Pocha practices exorcism through mimetic subversion — producing images that undermine assumptions inherent in the signifiers "race," "nation" and "ethnicity." This archeological practice produces per-



Eugenio Salas and Tejpal Ajji. *The Other Coalition Forces*, Photo: Rob Gill. Courtesy: Toronto Free Gallery

formative images that bring unconscious interracial fantasies and fears forward.

Jessica Wyman's reinterpretation of one of La Pocha's performances was concerned with the metaphor of landscape as the essence of national identity. She used herself as Canadian topography by having flags representing the country's multicultural composition acupuncture into her body. Her piece acknowledged that bodies belong to rich, hybrid identities and that not one but many landscapes form Canada. The performance also addressed the invisibility or normalization of whiteness — whereas black, yellow, red are always marked skin colors, white is a category that remains masked. Bringing to mind Paul Gilroy's argument that white hegemony is produced through the white colonization of "normal," Wyman's piece proposed whiteness as a cultural trait made of the sum of all colors. While the acupuncture was taking place, Gómez Peña read an official local narrative — facts from a Toronto city website combined with a narrative of Wyman's reflections on what it means to be a white female post-immigrant body. The narrative also addressed the contradiction inherent in "nationality," which can never be a fixed category because the social body is made up of the constant comings-in and out of its members, and thus it is always becoming other. As a conclusion to the performance, the audience was invited to remove the flags from her body, engaging the ritualized narrative struggle the piece explored.

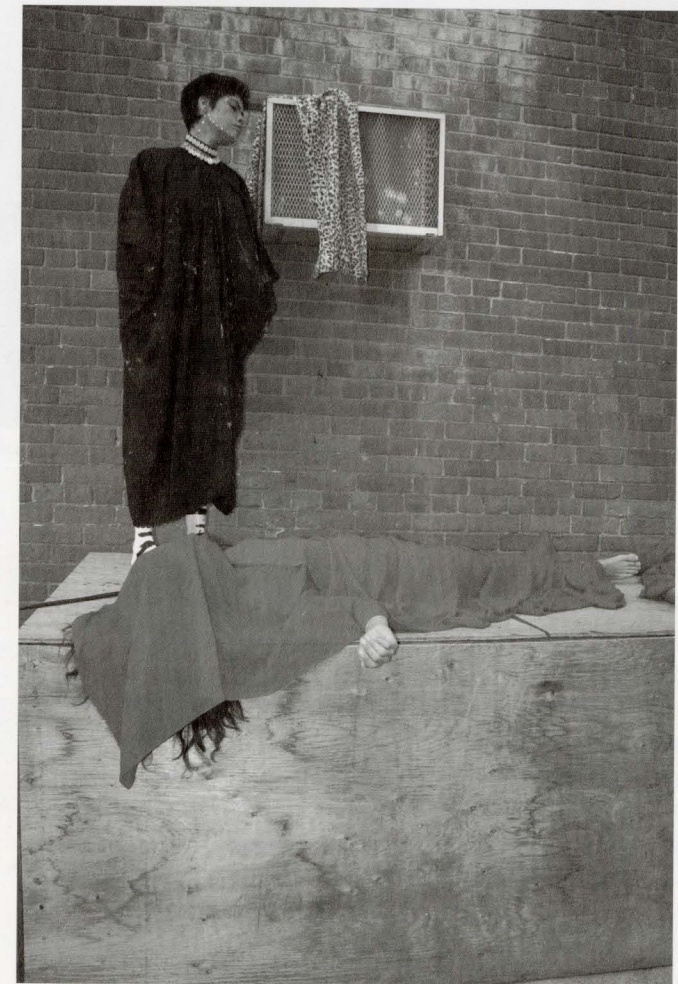
The question of how narratives are constructed and dislocated in personal and collective memory was a common thread in the works. Elysa Martinez's performance, also a reinterpretation of one of La

Pocha's performances, called on viewers to participate in mourning for the traces of her past embodied in toys, photographs and artifacts from Mexico. By taking the objects out of a suitcase and placing them around her body, she created a site for remembrance and forgetting. Through her performance, she invited the audience to mourn with her and imbue the objects of her past with a new dislocated beginning.

Seated across from one another, holding bowls containing mixtures evocative of Mexico and India (hibiscus flower powder and margarine and curry powder and margarine), Eugenio Salas and Tejpal Ajji covered one another's bodies with the blends. Performing an intense dialogue through the gaze, hands and gestures,

they conducted a ritual of distention and then of acknowledgment. The piece was completed by a mutual cleansing which symbolized a reconciliation of the differences sketched out through the marking of their bodies as Other.

Anand Rajaram and Ash Yoon collaborated on a piece that addressed the treatment of prisoners in detention camps and immigrant detention centers. Rajaram was tied down and bore the signs of torture. After a few minutes, the audience spontaneously took responsibility for his situation by untying him. Louise Liliefeldt wore a hybrid bird-zebra costume recalling South African Apartheid. Creating an arresting image on the sidewalk across from the gallery with her own and two



Louise Liliefeldt, *The Other Coalition Forces*, Photo: Rob Gill, Courtesy: Toronto Free Gallery





Michelle Ceballos, *The Other Coalition Forces*,  
Photo: Rob Gill, Courtesy: Toronto Free Gallery

other bodies lying on the ground covered with red cloths, Liliefeldt's prolonged intervention on the street evoked the violence of compulsory, institutionalized cultural differentiation and the danger of brutality in processes of reconciliation.

During a 3-hour-long performance, Michèle Ceballos created a dialog with music and video, her movements and a range of props such as strap-ons, a variety of shoes, masks, corsets, wigs, a sword. She became dominatrix and phallic mother, transforming herself into forms ranging from strange creatures to a broken balle-

rina. She imbued her beautiful dancer's movements with political dissent by juxtaposing symbols made of gestures with objects, creating a living montage that suggested the links between power and desire: a Nixon mask, a blond wig, a black corset, an exposed breast. The objects functioned like prosthetic extensions of her body. Enacting a cyborgic experience, Ceballos also performed against projected moving images of performances by absent members of the collective.

The final piece was a performance-karaoke involving both performers and the audience, which began with a body wrapped in the Spanish flag being thrown onstage. Spreading post-colonial rage by spitting on the body marked as colonial set the tone for the collaboration that Gómez Peña created in the form of *tableaux vivants* that became cathartic instances in which the demons of the collective unconscious were exorcized.

During the performance, the audience was encouraged to follow their desires and become producers rather than receptors of images. The *tableaux vivants* were images that recalled those of mainstream media, but gone awry. In an orgy of signifiers of war, torture, gender difference and sexual empowerment new meanings were constructed collectively. Exposing a desire for unmediated or unprejudiced recognition, the audience karaoke demonstrated the potential bodies and objects have as signifiers when activated by collective agency.

Interacting and constituting a transient community, and in a move that was an ecstatic impulse, audience members exposed themselves by getting naked, rejoicing in the space for their agency.

While the city of Toronto is known to be the most "multicultural city in the world" one of the concerns that arose in the performances was that a reified multiculturalism could be repressive and alienating, and that identity politics has produced essentialist and reified communities. If the communities of émigrés are based on specters that are revived in dislocation, how is it possible to construct an object that is shared communally? If identities are in permanent flux, they are formed performatively and dialogically.

Another of the questions that emerged in the performance was, beyond taking a stance of oppositionality or "otherness," how is it possible to articulate a space that allows for participation and representation, that can through dialog and images go beyond an essential identity as signifier? A place where desires are constructed and interests put aside? In the performances, the common desire was to speak and be heard. Rather than celebrating minority, the performances acknowledged that we are *all* Other.

*Irmgard Emmelhainz is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Toronto. She is working on Jean Genet's and Jean-Luc Godard's interventions in Palestine and with the Black Panthers.*

#### Notes

For lack of space I was unable to discuss performances by Ulysses Castellanos, Carlo Guillermo Proto, Rita Kamacho, Salma Daas, and Rashmi Varma, who also took part on the event — my apologies. I would like to thank Jessica Wyman, Eugenio Salas and Teijpal S. Ajji for sharing their experiences of the workshop and performance with me.

1. From "La Pocha Nostra Manifesto."

<http://www.pochanostra.com>, Date Revised: 08/09/05.

## Built on Running Water: Rebecca Belmore's *Fountain*

51st Venice Biennale  
10 June – 16 June 2005

review by Richard William Hill



Rebecca Belmore, *Fountain*, Production Still, 2005, Canada Pavilion, 2005 Venice Biennale, Photo: José Ramón González, Courtesy: Belkin Art Gallery

There is a line-up to see Rebecca Belmore's installation *Fountain* on opening day. As you enter the darkened space of the Canadian Pavilion your senses are immediately engaged. To the left are the roar of falling water and the flash of light and moving images. There is a moment of disorientation as you try to sort things out in the darkness, but it

quickly becomes evident that you are watching a film that is being rear-projected onto a transparent screen. The film appears a bit grainy, but this is because the screen itself is a wall of water that falls continuously from floor to ceiling. Not grain then, but drops and ripples.

The sound of falling water is loud. If you

approach the liquid screen you can feel the coolness of the water and watch the images flash across its constantly moving surface. The temptation to put your hand into the water and through the screen is elicited — it was for me, anyway. How often do you encounter such an ephemeral screen, and who hasn't wanted to reach across that divide?



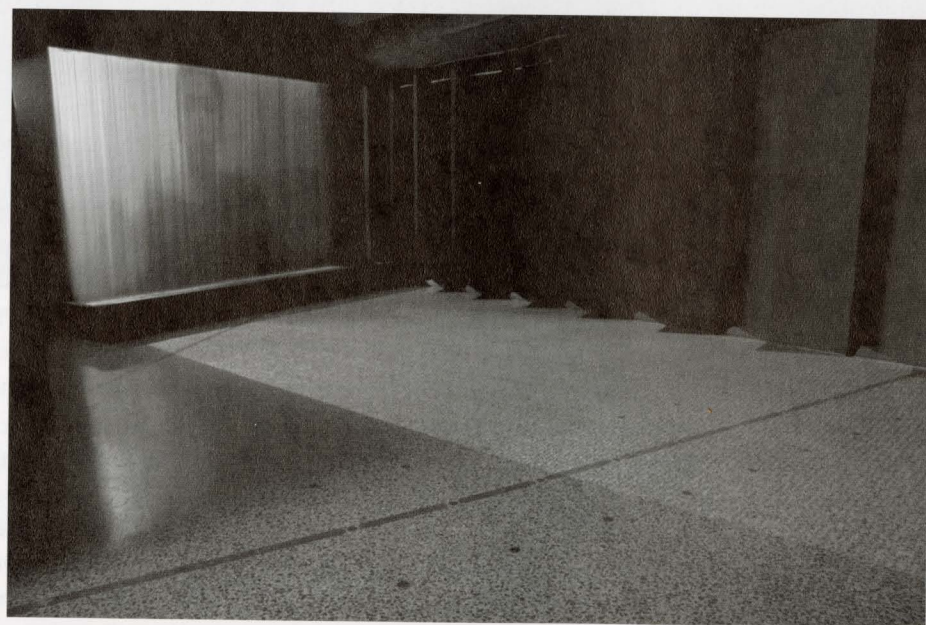
I chose to begin with Rebecca Belmore's *Fountain* as an installation — as an object that is experienced in space as well as time — because we exist in a mass culture of narrative junkies. Narrative is deceptively easy to translate into writing and can so quickly become the whole story. It is worth noting from the start that one of *Fountain's* important themes, water, is not only visualized on film, it is literally present in the space. More than that, water is the screen itself, the support on which the project depends. If we lose track of the materiality of the work we miss the clever way in which Belmore has combined her skills as a performer and an object maker into an installation that uses film without simply being a film.

If *Fountain* contains, as the artist claims, a reference to the invention of the fountain in Venice it is almost as clear that she has dematerialized the fountain itself, or, per-

haps, radically de-emphasized its architectural dimension — its solidity as an object — in order to privilege its most transient and immaterial aspect. The media description of the work might accurately read: "light on moving water." The sensuousness of *Fountain* connects it with the immediacy of her performance and leads me to think of Bruce Nauman's *Self-Portrait as Fountain* (1966–67), in which he becomes a living, water-spitting fountain. If, in Belmore's *Fountain*, the artist's body, her primary medium, is present but also displaced through the mediation of film, the embodied physicality of the audience itself is nevertheless engaged by a Belmoresque appeal to the senses. In doing this she has preserved (or translated) something of the immediacy of her work in performance.

The film itself begins with a crane shot, the camera travelling over driftwood and

sand on an ocean beach in British Columbia. The camera approaches a large stack of driftwood that seems to burst spontaneously into flames as it gets close. We watch the fire burn for a moment and then the film cuts to a scene of the artist struggling and thrashing in the frigid water. Obviously distressed, she seems to be trying to fill a large, battered red bucket. Eventually the scene shifts again. The water has stilled and Belmore sits meditatively in it up to her chest. She rises with the filled bucket and begins to walk out of the water and directly across the beach toward the camera. With a startlingly loud and primal grunt (several audience members actually flinch) she tosses the contents of the bucket toward the screen. The liquid that leaves the bucket is no longer transparent water however, but is now dark, almost black, as it sails toward the audience. It doesn't quite reach you, of course, but hits a



Rebecca Belmore, *Fountain*, installation view, 2005, Canada Pavilion, 2005 Venice Biennale, Photo: José Ramón González, Courtesy: Belkin Art Gallery

transparent screen between the artist and the camera where it splatters out in ropy red tendrils. It's blood. The entire frame, from edge to edge, is coated in red. This projected blood runs down the screen of falling water, creating a rich doubling of effect — a blurring between reality within the film and the physical reality of the fountain experienced by the viewer. We confront the artist across this sea of blood. She stares back — her work is up on the screen, water turned to blood — the question is what are we going to do about it?

It almost goes without saying that this blood will be read as a symbol of the violent history of colonial Canada flung in Canada's face (or perhaps in the face of an indifferent world?). Who could not find that a lovely gesture? Yet like most good works of art, *Fountain* seems to be functioning on several levels at once. What interests me is that it seems not only to be speaking about a specific history, but also to be summing up the nature of Belmore's artistic practice itself. Again, the connection to performance is crucial because it is in the performative space that a body is so often put at risk or crisis in Belmore's art. This is the crucible of her art, where, as she says, "water changes into blood, blood into water and history into art."

To me, *Fountain* seems to be about art as ritual.<sup>1</sup> I know Belmore is uneasy with this term. Perhaps she is concerned that "ritual" can all too easily become "Native ritual" or "Anishinabe ritual," which, in this case, is a much too specific category. Belmore is frank about her relationship to traditional Anishinabe culture, which is marked as much by rupture and dislocation as it is by continuity. As she says in an interview with Scott Watson, "I often think

of my experience as being from the periphery of Anishinabe knowledge, but it is through the practice of art that I sometimes do find connections to these ideas." If *Fountain* draws on a very particularly Anishinabe respect for the power of water, it puts these ideas into play across a broad spectrum of possible meanings.

With this caveat, I think the concept of ritual applies to Belmore's work in the sense that, as in *Fountain*, her performances often involve staging an experience that in some way tests, challenges or imperils the artist's body to create a state in which a new awareness is achieved and enunciated. I say ritual because it seems to be the process itself that somehow guarantees, or at least makes possible, the insight. In Belmore's case this often means making visible, at the most viscerally incontrovertible level, those rendered vulnerable or disenfranchised through their invisibility. Frequently this process occurs through a bodily engagement with the land or with some elemental aspect of the natural world. In *Fountain*, our attention is drawn to fire and, even more so, water.

Once again attention to the materiality of the work is rewarding. If this is not only a work of art but also a work *about* art, then the nature of the screen becomes important. The moment that the film insists that we become aware of the screen, as a screen, is simultaneous with the moment of artistic transformation, this magic that turns water into blood. The now seemingly bloodied water of the screen then structures our relationship to the artist. We are on one side, she on the other. The potential permeability of the screen seems an invitation to gather our courage and experience the same primal forces that the artist did, to share an

encounter with icy water and its gift of transformation.

Water, as Belmore uses it, seems at once to speak of the eternal — the ocean — and the transient flow that makes up the screen. Heraclitus's famous remark that "you cannot step in the same river twice" suggests that running water can function as a metaphor for the paradox of change within a larger continuity. The river is constantly altered by its own movement, yet somehow retains its identity. It is as if, for Belmore, art is a fragile but potent gift, a dip into the icy waters of eternity that can, for a paradoxical moment, provide a revelation.

#### Obligatory Political Afterword

This review has emphasized the poetics of *Fountain* over its politics, which have been thoroughly dealt with elsewhere (although I hope you will agree that these are quite political poetics after all). Nevertheless it is impossible, being who I am, not to note one thing. In the catalogue interview, Belmore mentions the responsibility she feels as the first Indigenous woman to represent a country at Venice. I myself observed another first. Unless I'm mistaken (always possible, alas), Lee-Ann Martin's essay on *Fountain* was the first time an Aboriginal writer has been published in *Canadian Art* magazine. And it has only taken until 2005. I love this country.

*Richard William Hill is writer and independent curator currently living in London and pursuing a PhD, the subject of which is the problem of agency in the art of Jimmie Durham.*

#### Notes:

1. Jolene Rickard uses the same term in her catalogue essay.



# The [New] Politics of Identity:

## A checklist and invitation

by Gita Hashemi,  
Jessica Wyman and  
Izida Zorde

On 10 August 2005, a panel discussion organised by The Power Plant was held at the Rivoli in downtown Toronto. The theme of the evening, as articulated by head of public programs and education Terence Dick, was identity politics, an issue Fuse has long been addressing in its pages and that has been a focus of much political and cultural organizing over the past several decades. The subject was chosen for the evening, Mr. Dick stated in a shaky voice, because of the Glenn Ligon exhibition then on view at the Power Plant.

Clearly, public discussion of identity politics in contemporary art was of great interest to an audience that chose the back room of the Rivoli over the beautiful summer evening. Composed of both people who have long been involved in debating the politics of identity as well as young and emerging artists and scholars, the audience was eager to hear the thoughts of panelists Rinaldo Walcott, Ken Montague, Emelie Chhangur, and Elizabeth Harney — all of whom are engaged in making and circulating art discourses that are often so deeply connected to issues of identities and politics.

That evening, we were disappointed and frustrated by what we had hoped would be a stimulating conversation. The potential for an informed and lively debate was entirely unfulfilled and the majority of the audience sat in silent disbelief of the inadequate forms of engagement offered from the stage. And so, with a view to having

more productive public dialogues we offer this checklist for both hosts and panelists.

1. DO your research before declaring a theme for the conversation. Look beyond your immediate circle of colleagues and friends and consult with others who are knowledgeable about the theme. If you are not interested in or feel unqualified to address the theme, invite an outside moderator. Delegation is a good thing.

2. DO invite panelists who take keen interest in and have informed knowledge of the theme. Make sure they both want to be there and feel they have something to say.

3. DO get clear about what you hope to get out of the conversation and make this clear to panelists. Why deal with this now? Why here? Circulate a list of questions or thoughts in advance to establish common threads and dialogue amongst the panelists.

4. DO know your audience and help them understand why the chosen debate is of interest, significance or relevance, even if they have to negotiate their way through material they may not be familiar with. Contextualize the conversation.

5. DON'T moderate a discussion about which you don't care or don't feel qualified to speak. Not only is this disrespectful but it's a waste of everyone's time. This may seem elementary, but at the Rivoli the moderator (who had not done his research) positioned himself as a "white man" who didn't know much about identity politics. As if he, by virtue of his assumed-neutral identity and undeclared politics, was exempt from any inferences of both politics and identities.

6. DON'T force people to sit on panels if they've said they don't want to and panelists, don't sit on a panel if you don't want to. We refrain here, for brevity's sake, from problematizing the obvious dynamics of power and interplay of politics and identities that manifested themselves so poorly on the stage on that evening.

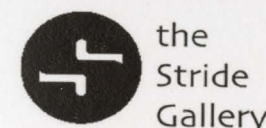
7. DON'T berate an audience for not being sufficiently informed about or engaged in a subject area. It is your responsibility to inform and engage them. Obviously, the audience at the Rivoli, like any other audience, was diversely invested in and informed about the debates and politics of identity; nevertheless, we showed up willing to learn and engage. That should count for something, no?

We do not have to wait to raise a debate about the intersections of politics and identities in contemporary arts until the rare occasions when an artist of colour has a major show in town. Various identities continue to be mobilized in strategic and tactical exercises of power for a variety of political/social/cultural/economic aims (and, might we add, artistic gains, altruistic and otherwise). Racial profiling is a routine practice in urban law enforcement, the "war on terror," New Orleans, the Paris riots, the Sidney riots. Need we say more about the collision of identities and politics? Clearly, yes. Need we critically address the interplay of identities and politics in the structural and discursive practices of art? Yes. To these ends, we invite you to respond to any of the issues raised here, or raise other issues relevant to a debate about identities, politics and the arts.

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## SNAP GALLERY

society of northern alberta print-artists

The Society of Northern Alberta Print-artists (SNAP Gallery) 10309-97 Street Edmonton, Alberta T5M 0M1 p. 780.423.1492 f. 780.426.1177 e. [snap@snapartists.com](mailto:snap@snapartists.com)

FEBRUARY 9 - MARCH 11:  
FEMKE VAN DELFT  
IN THE FRONT ROOM: INGRID COUGHLIN

MARCH 16 - APRIL 15:  
CLINT WILSON  
IN THE FRONT ROOM: JEKA ARNOLD

APRIL 20 - MAY 20  
MARCIA HUYER  
IN THE FRONT ROOM: SCOTT ROGERS



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