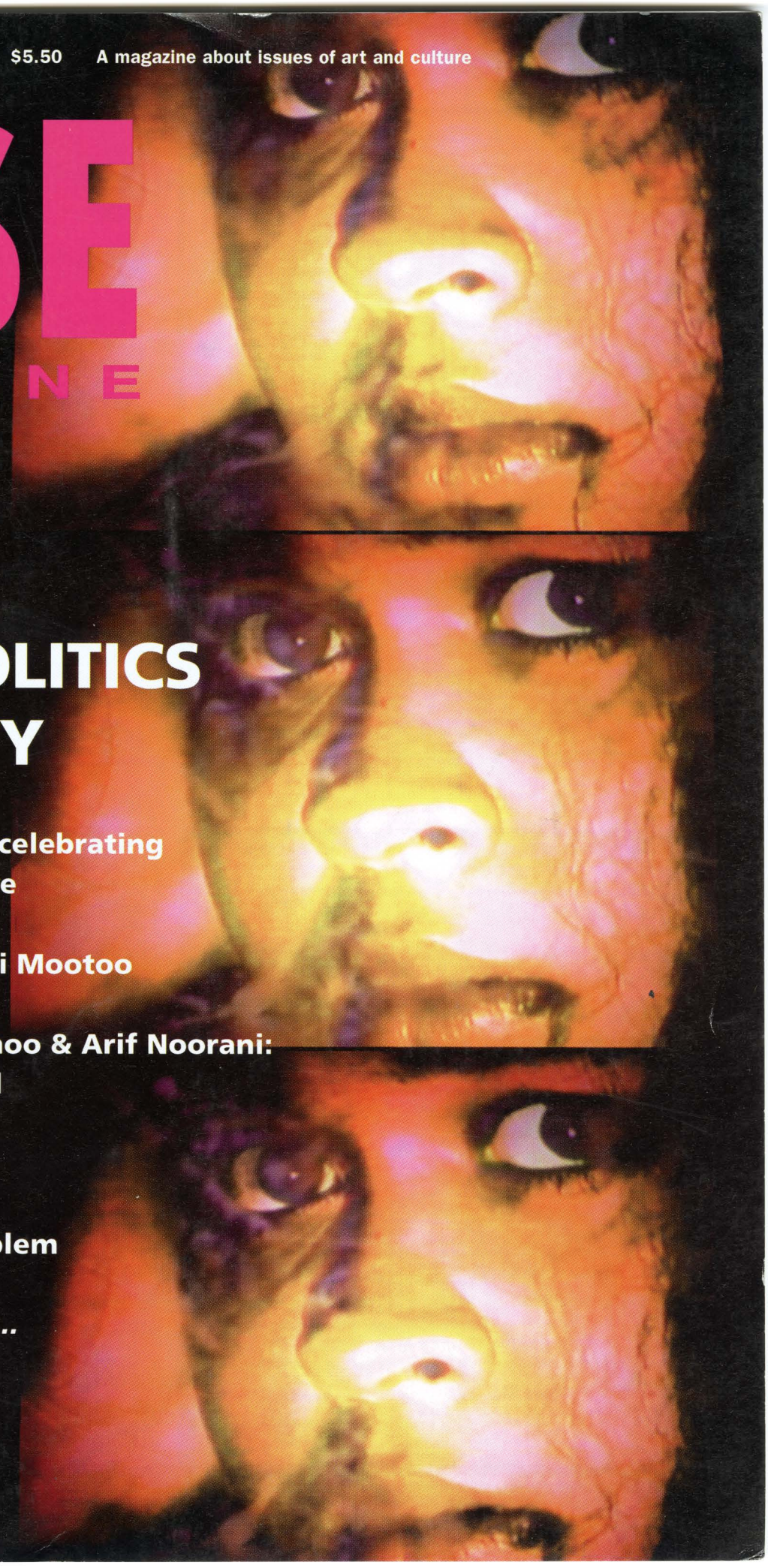
Volume 22 Number 2 $5.50 A magazine about issues of art and culture

FUSE MAGAZINE



TOWARD A NEW POLITICS OF IDENTITY

Rinaldo Walcott on de-celebrating Black expressive culture

Interview with Shani Mootoo

Sean Lokaisingh-Meighoo & Arif Noorani: redefining the political in art and community

Gary Kibbins: art's "political" problem

Plus reviews and more...

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Cadboro Bay:
Index to an Incomplete History
Melinda Mollineaux
March 13 - May 1, 1999
Curated by: Andrea Fatona

Patchwork:
Reconstructing the Personal
joelewis
May 15 - June 26, 1999

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Colette Urban, still from performance
Pretend Not to See Me, 1996
Photo: Elisabeth Feryn

Shake A Leg: performative sites of Colette Urban
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March 6 - August 22

MindToys
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LOUISE NOGUCHI:
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~scope art & film

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~ **The Truth Channel.** *The Organization Man.* Western Front .

Screenings
~ *markings; dimension through surface.* Curated by Alexander MacKenzie. Grand Luxe, Western Front.

Presentations
~ *Double Indemnity: Art and Popular Cinema.* ~ with Martin Arnold. *Curated by* Cate Rimmer. Charles H. Scott Gallery.
~ *Motion/Mutation:* Martin Arnold at THE PACIFIC CINEMATHEQUE.

The Western Front gratefully acknowledges the support of The Canada Council, The British Columbia Arts Council, The City of Vancouver, The Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade; our ~scope co-sponsors, The Blinding Light!! Cinema, The Pacific Cinematheque, Charles H. Scott Gallery, ECIAD, Video In, Performance Video Wall. Thanks also to Colin Griffiths for his assistance.

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The Canada Council

ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL
CONSEIL DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO

4 **Editorial**

7 **Letters**

Column

11 DE-CELEBRATING BLACK EXPRESSIVE CULTURE
A Polemic
by Rinaldo Walcott

Artist's Project

26-27 VAGINA AND TENTH GATE (ANTERIOR FONTANELLE)
by Har-Prakash Khalsa & Sat Dharam Kaur

Short FUSE

56 CARIBANA PANEL DISCUSSION REVIEWED
by Niyabingy

Still from *Home Feeling: Struggle for a Community*, Jennifer Hodge, 1983, 16mm, 57:30 min. Courtesy of the NFB.
See Rinaldo Walcott's column on p. 11.

contents

VOLUME 22 NUMBER 2

Interview

18 SHANI MOOTOO
Shifting Perceptions, Changing Practices
with Sarindar Dhaliwal

Features

28 SOME KEYWORDS AND ARGUMENTS IN CULTURAL POLITICS
by Sean Lokaisingh-Meighoo and Arif Noorani

35 BORED BEDMATES
Art & Criticism at the Decade's End
by Gary Kibbins

Reviews

43 SHIFT, CHANGE 1988–1998
James Williams
Review by Sherri Telenko

45 THE SENSE IN "YAWNING"
Organized by Hermit Foundation, Czech Republic
Review by Jo Williams

47 POP OFF
the regular 8 faction
Review by John McCullough

50 *THE ELECTRICAL FIELD*
by Kerri Sakamoto (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 1998)
Book review by Renuka Sooknanan

52 *GISCOME ROAD*
by C.S. Giscombe (Illinois State University: Dalkey Archive Press, 1998)
Book review by Peter Hudson

Cover image: stills from *Her Sweetness Lingers*, a video by Shani Mootoo, 1994, 12:00 min.
Photos by Kim Tomczak and Petra Chevrier.

editorial

In the December issue of Library Journal, Fuse Magazine receives a strong endorsement. Eric Bryant writes:

> The back of the book offers a half-dozen reviews. The content does not focus exclusively on Canadian art in fact one recent issue contained major articles on the art of Argentina and Turkey but Canadian artists and galleries do get more play here than in any of the major U.S. magazines. Art libraries in the United States and most Canadian libraries should consider adding this committed, enthusiastic view of the contemporary art world.

A commitment to covering Canadian art in all its diversity is no small task in these days of potential funding cut-backs, reviews of programs and the redefinition of what art is by some funding bodies. Yet, it is apparent that readers out there recognize arts coverage when they see it, even if, boards of directors do not always do so. There can be no let-up on the insistence that whatever comes out of the current review at the Ontario Arts Council, the question of diversity in relationship to arts coverage must be front and centre. It must be one of the things that we are willing to go to the wall for.

Eric Bryant also writes of FUSE that "each sixty-page issue is filled with interviews and criticism, which generally looks beyond an individual show to examine broader trends." In keeping with his insights, Sean Lokaisingh-Meighoo and Arif Noorani take on and take up the language and politics of community art festivals, suggesting that the time for their usefulness might have come and gone. These writers argue against any too-easy notions of community and suggest that community founded upon terms of an assumed and sometimes fictional sameness is doomed to break down. They bring a critical eye, along with a hope for better possibilities for recognizing more complex manifestations of community. Similarly, Shani Mootoo, in conversation with Sarindar Dhaliwal, questions the boundaries and limits of community. But Mootoo also alerts us to some important historical context for thinking about community as well. In particular, raising the thorny issue of multiculti art in the 1980s, Mootoo questions why this work is not being aggressively collected by art institutions and patrons of the arts. In short, she suggests that a legacy could possibly go missing with no record left for those who did not live the 1980s multiculti moment. But Gary Kibbins also asks us to consider the relationship and tensions between "political art" and "critical art" practices. In his assessment of the differences and relations between political art and critical art he argues that political art is being forced out of the contemporary art world.

The politics of art and how it is read are the focus of Rinaldo Walcott's contribution. He raises the question of how and why there is a certain urgency in requiring critical and serious informed conversations with Black Canadian expressive works, ones that move beyond racist denunciation or uncritical celebration. He argues for the role of the critic as crucial to the serious sustainability of Black Canadian work.

In our review section, Sherri Telenko looks at the art of documentary photography in her review of "James Williams: shift change 1988–1998" whose documentation of working class life was done with an "insider view and passion." John McCullough's review of "POP OFF: the regular 8 faction" looks at the relationship between technology and the social. In particular, the highlighting of "lo-tech" approaches seem to speak, in McCullough's terms, to the tensions between modernism and postmodernism. Kerri Sakamoto recently won the Commonwealth Regional Prize for Literature (Canada and the Caribbean) for her acclaimed first novel *The Electrical Field*. Renuka Sooknanan's review of the novel takes us inside the intricate moments of community formation and its link to a practice and memory of mourning. C.S. Giscombe, an African American, gives Canada a piece of its Black history back in his poetic mapping of a Black presence in northern British Columbia. Peter Hudson boldly suggests that African Canadians might benefit from reading Giscombe for his approach to placing this piece of Black history in numerous complex Black diaspora relations. He lauds *Giscome Road* as an "unusual brilliant journey." And, speaking of journeys, Jo Williams takes us to the Czech Republic and to the former Šamorín synagogue in Slovakia transformed into the At Home Gallery. Her review of the show "Yawning" raises important questions concerning modernity, space, history, and the memory and refashioning of architecture, as well as what might be at stake in the continuous remaking of the world we currently inhabit. It is possible to suggest after reading Williams' review that we might all just be currently in a state of yawning?

This issue of FUSE is in keeping with our attempts to pay special attention to Canada, while not being limited by any too easy assertions of national borders. At FUSE, we want to imagine and represent the nation in all its diversity, and to represent that diversity as an outgrowth of what actually happens out there, but as well, we want to image what might be possible to have happen out there. In this regard, Fuse remains committed to the principle of art as a broadly defined category which is always up for question and reinterpretation. We won't let you yawn.

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February 17, 1999

Dear Editor,

Many thanks for Ramabai Espinet's article on Caribana ("Caribana: A Diasporic Dub," *Fuse Magazine* 22, no. 1, pp. 18-25). It managed to be both scholarly and refreshingly free of cult-crit jargon. In other words, just what FUSE needs.

One tiny quibble though; the United Nations has never described Toronto as the world's most multicultural city, or even words to that effect. This is a genuine urban legend about Toronto, though as urban legends go, it's not too far off the mark.

Sincerely,
Seamus Montoya
Toronto

RE: RE: Artist-run Centres

As a member of the three-year-old DYNAMO Arts Association I was overjoyed at the idea of our name being mentioned in a national publication (see Reid Shier's recent article: "RE: Artist-run Centres," *Fuse Magazine* 21, no. 4, pp. 21-23), and felt that it was definitely the best press we have received to date, but I was also extremely upset over the way that both the Gallery and the Association were misrepresented by Reid's article. In the midst of these two conflicting emotions, I felt that although Reid's suggestion that an international profile and increased professionalization would be the direction to take for ARCs, it is certainly not the only solution and possibly not the best one.

I would like to start by saying that the DYNAMO Arts Association is *not* an ephemeral initiative, and *not* a collective. The DYNAMO Arts Association was incorporated in August 1996 with a mandate to provide a forum for emerging artists working in the areas of sculpture, installation and time-based media. We fulfill this mandate by providing eighteen publicly rented studio spaces, by providing our space as a resource for community groups, and by running a non-profit gallery that maintains the mandate already stated. The Association was started by a group of Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design students and graduates, and it was those people who became directors when the association legally incorporated itself. Although the Gallery *was* the responsibility of one individual, then DYNAMO president (*and* one of those five directors), Damon Crain, the responsibility was handed over to a volunteer manager and curatorial committee. The rent is paid by the eighteen studio members and the Gallery is subsidized by this rent. The Gallery was started in January of 1998, and in the past twelve months we have sponsored twelve events.

My experiences as an artist in Vancouver, B.C., as a studio member at DYNAMO, and as the volunteer manager of the DYNAMO Gallery, lead me to suggest that although DYNAMO may be an impractical model for *some* established ARCs, we are a viable entity with an effective infrastructure. Our structure as an association, as opposed to a collective, or co-op, allows members to disregard initiatives within the association. Therefore, those *involved* are involved because of their own ambition and volunteer their time because of their own agendas. Because of our five directors and "open studio" concept, a sense of community is encouraged and tasks and chores are spread throughout our constituents. This helps to prevent individuals from "burning out," disperses power and authority throughout the group, and allows members to be involved without preventing them from pursuing their own interests, thus allowing them to remain integral members of the artistic community. Any impressions of our alternativeness stem not from our (supposed) unbureaucratized and ephemeral structure, but from the fact that our gallery is not reliant upon federal and provincial funding grants. We are free from the confines of showing mid-career artists to compete with our neighbours for funding, and this allows us to show those "first timers" who, like us, are full of the artistic self-determination that Reid has apparently lost. Unfortunately, this also means that we have to exist on a bare-bones budget. We scramble for paint

and spackle and ask selected artists to pay for their invitations as well as the stamps to mail them. It also means we are faced with the necessity to keep our members and volunteers satisfied with their membership, for without their help we would be nowhere. From the past members who left because of political differences, to the people who simply wish to rent a space for their own endeavours, every member and volunteer of the DYNAMO Arts Association is an integral part of our dynamic centre, a fact which Mr. Shier appears to have overlooked.

In conclusion, I would like to say that Mr. Shier's suggestion of pursuing a stronger international profile is not necessarily bad. Why shouldn't established ARCs pursue this initiative? An international profile means international media with more publicity, more awareness, and more discourse. On the other hand though, it is not necessarily good, for, if the possibility of funding for new ARCs is increasingly remote, and an international profile means higher competition for the limited number of spaces, then it stands to reason that emerging artists will be further alienated from the system which in turn will further alienate those internationally acclaimed established ARCs. Perhaps some of those established ARCs should re-evaluate their governing documents and selection policies. Being incorporated is a necessity. Showing mid-career artists and being reliant upon funding is not.

—Andrew Armour

Note: The DYNAMO Arts Association and the DYNAMO Gallery is located at 142 W. Hastings St., Vancouver, B.C., V6B 1G8. Tel. 604-602-9005. The opinions presented in this letter are wholly those of the author and in no way represent the opinions of the DYNAMO Arts Association, the DYNAMO Gallery or DYNAMO Members (past or present).

erratum

In the column "Cultural Markings, Cultural Appropriation: The Art of Mehndi," (vol. 22, no. 1) a footnote was omitted during the editing process, for which the writer takes full responsibility. The paragraph beginning page 14 should end with a footnote crediting Deborah Kapchan's work:

***I borrow this idea of porous skin from Deborah Kapchan. Her work is an important marker for reading contemporary shifts in the cultural performativity of mehndi in North America especially within women's communities. For greater detail on community, artistry and mehndi wear see Deborah Kapchan, "Moroccan Women's Body Signs," *Bodylore*, ed. Katherine Young (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1993), p. 8.**

De-celebrating Black Expressive Culture

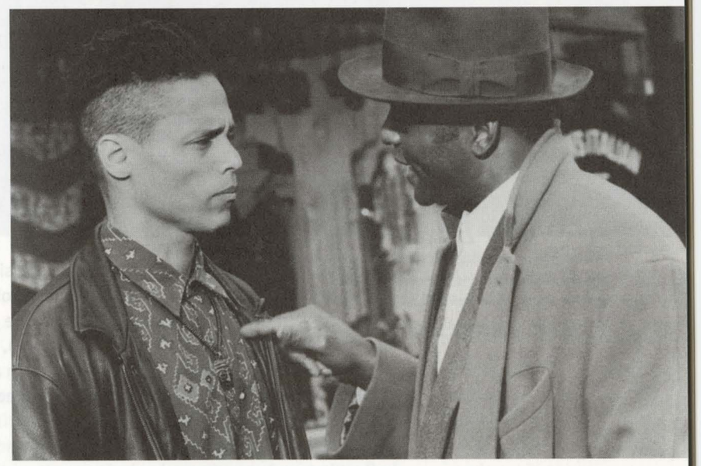
A POLEMIC

by Rinaldo Walcott

Over twenty years ago, Dionne Brand started a conversation about Black art in Canada in the pages of the now defunct *Spear Magazine*. The conversations with painters, writers and choreographers, which attempted to embed the works within the larger realm of Black cultural practices, histories and desires, set a stage for thinking about Black artistic and critical culture and Black art reception in Canada. In a sense, they speak to the relationship between art and its other cultural components. They represent a moment in Black Canadian history, the consideration of which triggers a reflection on the state of contemporary cultural criticism in Black Canada.

Spear Magazine operated within a context that is almost non-existent today. It was a forum for different kinds of Black cultural desires: contemporary fashion, popular culture, local and national news items, and vitally important cultural commentary, criticism and debate. In *Spear Magazine,* essays on early Black film, blaxploitation, the relationship between the community and theatre, interviews with political activists and politicians and reviews of books and music sat alongside advertisements for performances by calypsonians, jazz artists and R&B performers, stories on movie stars, ads for hair products and the latest in Afrocentric dress. *Spear* held all these different agendas in interesting tension. Looking back, it is almost possible to romanticize it. We shall resist doing so. But with a dearth of such cultural products now, *Spear* stands out as an experiment well worth retrying.

Outside of *Spear*, the search for critical debate around Black expressive culture in Canada yields little of substance. What one finds instead is exuberant celebration or racist denunciation. Missing is a culture of debate that moves beyond the cult of celebration and personality to enter into serious dialogue with works that seek to expand, deepen and define Blackness in Canada. The 1990s, however, might well mark the end of the culture of celebration for Black Canadian expressive works. The time is right to provoke a conversation beyond the arts of promotion. As more and more Black Canadians produce artistic works, we can dispense with the secret fear that critical engagement might mean that no one gets to produce ever again. Films, music, plays and novels will continue to be produced and supported in a host of different venues; artists' exhibits will continue in institutional contexts, alternative or artist-run galleries, and in more informal



Still from *Soul Survivor*, dir. Stephen Williams, 1995, 35 mm, 89 min.
Distributed by Alliance Releasing.
Courtesy of the Film Reference Library, Toronto.

and improvised spaces. But it is only through sustained critical dialogue that Black Canadian work will survive as relevant to the histories and desires of Black Canadians, and national conversations more generally.

Whether in "Black" organs of "debate" like *Word* or *Share*, or in "mainstream" print media such as *The Toronto Star*, *The Globe and Mail*, or *Now*, Black expressive culture is reviewed and discussed with little or no attention to the complex and contradictory histories that give rise to its birth. With few exceptions, successive works of art are discussed as though they were cut off from Black experience, cultural history and debate. In many cases, the artists are themselves complicit with the insistence that their production is an exceptional, unique contribution. "The first of its kind" is a constant refrain. Whether the artists know it or not, or are willing to be honest about the impetus for their work, a culture of critique and engagement is necessary if the work is to survive and have a continuous impact on the culture that spawned it and, hopefully, on the culture that the work hopes to impact. The absence of organs that can nourish and support Black intellectual interventions into the arts, and the lack of review space in those that exist, is one reason why Black Canadian culture is poorly reviewed. Can you imagine a Black public intellectual on the Canadian scene?

White Critics and Black Canadian Culture

Generally, white critics of Black Canadian expressive culture know almost nothing about the contexts of the works with which they set out to engage. One reviewer for *Books in Canada* (vol. 27, no. 6, 1998), Ted Whittaker, was "brave" enough to make such a statement recently. Reviewing three books by Black Canadians (as if that didn't matter) Whittaker erroneously exclaimed,

> To read black Canadian literature is a heady adventure—the texts, and the writers' careers in some instances their apparent tenure in this country, are so recent—and it's true, they themselves are so thin on the ground—that the works can still be looked at critically without recourse to specialization. Almost everything remains to be said about these poets and novelists, fiercely independent but commonly concerned about the minute particulars of various "black experiences" above north 44° or 49°. (p. 9)

What is most striking about Whittaker's claim is the attempt to render Black Canadian expressive culture so singular that it can be discussed as though cut off from the numerous ways in which Blackness is figured in the Americas, as both connection and disconnection, across regions and nations, and in relation to whiteness. In an earlier issue of *Books in Canada* (October, 1990), Dionne Brand refuted the suggestion that Black Canadian literature is so new that anyone could review it effectively:

> What some white reviewers lack is a sense of what literature that is made by Black people and other people of colour is about. If you read my work, you have to read Toni Morrison, you have to read Derek Walcott, Rosa Guy, Jean Rhys, Paule Marshall, Michael Anthony, Eddie Brathwaite, and African writers and poets... Bessie Head. I don't consider myself on any margin, on the margin of Canadian literature. I'm sitting right in the middle of Black Literature, because that's who I read, that's who I respond to.
>
> —*quoted in* Grammar of Dissent, *Carol Morrell (ed.), (Fredericton, New Brunswick: Goose Lane Editions, 1994)*

Contextualized in Brand's statement is a charting of Black diaspora. But it is also an indictment of the reading practices of critics who sever works from their many conversations, influences and debates. For the critics to adequately analyze the work they must engage more than the one text in front of them.

But Whittaker and other book reviewers are not alone in this kind of soft criticism. Even well-meaning left critics can reproduce restrictive notions of Black Canadian expressive culture. Film scholar Peter Harcourt, for example, celebrates Clement Virgo's *Rude* (1995) as "the crowning achievement of new Canadian cinema" (*CineAction*, no. 45, 1997, p. 9). Harcourt is correct to argue that *Rude* is one of the most stylistically exciting films in recent Canadian cinema. However, he is unable to adequately account for the film's diaspora aesthetics, the ways in which various signs of "Blackness"—historical, cultural, ephemeral and otherwise—circulate in *Rude*, or the possible

Still from *Rude*, dir. Clement Virgo, 1995, 35 mm, 89 min.
Distributed by Cineplex Odeon Films Canada.
Courtesy of the Film Reference Library, Toronto.

significance of those aesthetic strategies for Blackness in Canada. Accounting for diaspora aesthetics means that, for example, we cannot read the Rastafari imagery in *Rude* as merely "new" to the Canadian scene and its cinematic vision. Such a reading situates Blackness outside of Canadian-ness. What Rastafari means, how it circulates, is reformulated and contested in Jamaica, the wider Caribbean and in Canada is pertinent to making sense of how the Lion of Judah functions in *Rude* as a potentially conservative signal of cinematic Blackness. Yet, because Harcourt must move to cite and briefly engage postcoloniality through a reference to Fanon, he (un)wittingly suggests that more is at stake in the aesthetic style of *Rude*. We are faced with a question: how to view/read *Rude* and account for both its local utterances and its diasporic appropriations? It is this kind of question that imbues the continuing importance of works like *Rude* and the less discussed but equally interesting *Soul Survivor* (Stephen Williams, 1995).

I am not suggesting that some phenotypic test be applied to the critic, however. Anyone can learn what is necessary for adequately discussing a work within its historical, social and cultural contexts. Ample evidence exists of this south of the border where some of the best cultural commentators on African American expressive cultures are Anglo-Americans, for example, Jean Fagan Yellin or Craig Werner. With a few exceptions, however, the situation is very different on the Canadian scene where most of those who can

Missing is a culture of debate that moves beyond the cult of celebration and personality to enter into serious dialogue with works that seek to expand, deepen and define Blackness in Canada.

more than adequately speak to Black Canadian expressive cultures are housed in the academy—and the mainstream organs of dissemination like to believe in their non-existence. This goes along with the fact that background knowledge is not taken seriously as a prerequisite when it comes to the critique of Black expressive cultures. The result is that many Black Canadian expressive works are discussed only within the contexts of the artists' autobiography or as anti-racism gestures meant to help fix the nation. But, as more and more work is produced, this kind of criticism will be forced to go the way of the dump heap.

Black Critics and Black Expressive Culture

The role and the place of Black public intellectuals and academics working in cultural criticism has been minimal in the Canadian context. But it is too convenient to believe that there is no sustained study of Black Canadian work and that an archive of debate does not exist—although in the *mainstream* public sphere an engagement with this archive is missing. The myth that nothing exists fulfills many different kinds of desires and practices. Specifically, white mainstream critics are able to speak without the fear of having not done the necessary homework. As well, the mainstream disseminators of information can proceed to engage in a pernicious kind of skin trade whereby any Black person willing to put themselves on the line can be called upon to speak.

Black academics themselves have been weary of becoming too local in their concerns. We are not off the hook. Our sense of place and space in the academy has been circumscribed by how we understand our relationship to things like achieving tenure, having colleagues respect our work and devoting time to things that truly interests us. But, we have often not entered into public discourse and debate on questions of culture insofar as those questions exceed the narrow sociological confines, often the pathologies, of what many have come to call anti-racism. This narrow positioning of Black life in Canada as always in opposition to racism denies the evidence. We need only listen to folks shopping in the "West Indian" shops in Kensington Market to counter this. Racism is far off; the price of salted cod is more immediate. How can we talk about this beyond the pathology of immigrant-ness, for who wakes up each day and murmurs in their mind, "I am an immigrant"?

Writing on the rise of films made by the "Other" in the Canadian context, Kass Banning, a white critic, presciently argued some ten years ago that, "Canadian left cultural critics and producers open to developing theories of representation are relatively small in number—very few intellectuals, for historical and demographic reasons, produce outside of academic institutions, *and there are even fewer numbers of blacks in this constituency*" (*CineAction*, no. 16, 1989, p. 18, emphasis added). While the situation is not dire, it remains precariously positioned.

Recently, one of Canada's foremost Black filmmakers asked me when I was going to write a script. Either the filmmaker was poking fun at my lack of talent or he was serious. If we take him seriously we are faced with a dilemma: does one begin as a critic within Black Canadian culture as a stepping stone to be an artist? Is it not possible for Black folk to live a life only of ideas, criticism and intellectual engagement without a requirement to be an "artist"? Is the notion of a Black Canadian critic an impossible idea? This is where Black Canadians can learn much from African Americans and the Black British. There has always been among African Americans critics who did not take a recourse to being an artist to legitimate their criticism. The cultural critic and commentator was understood as a necessary and vital part of

maintaining and keeping alive the shortfalls and the brilliant insights of artistic expression. I think, for example, of Alain Locke and Henry Louis Gates Jr. Serious engagements with cultural expression, critique and debate has been a continuous part of the tradition of "Black arts" and some of the most sustaining works are so because of the ways in which they have provoked debate across a wide array of spaces.

Let me give an example which solidifies my argument. Recently, *The Toronto Star* (25 October 1998) published a commentary on the film *Beloved* (dir. Jonathan Demme, 1998) by Black Toronto playwright Andrew Moodie. The commentator made the ludicrous claim that understanding *Beloved* was difficult for him because his cultural heritage was not American, but "Canadian and Jamaican." He therefore did not share in the kind of historical and psychic pain that the film depicted and so he felt distanced from the film. Are we not more than our place of birth, our personal experiences and the myths we live as citizens in any given nation?

Moodie's use of history was thick with nation-state narratives of mythical difference—ones that suggest that my nation is better than yours. That the article was underwritten with certain assumptions of official history in the most historically conservative ways points to the need for putting to bed the lie of Canada as a refuge for Black people. Moodie's article is merely an example of the larger problem related to the terms and conditions concerning how one occupies the site of cultural critic in Black Canada. We must be aware of this posture because it does not exist for others—especially white others. And, yet the artist as critic has also served Black cultural criticism well and will continue to do so.

But let us return to the politics of celebration and how it conditions our reading and interpretive practices and strategies. The enthusiasm that greeted the work of Clement Virgo and Stephen Williams is gratifying and sometimes justified. But films by Jennifer Hodge de Silva (*Home Feeling: Struggle for Community*, 1983, NFB), Dionne Brand (*Sisters in the Struggle*, 1991, NFB), and a host of others, require specific frameworks. The inability to pose larger questions and concerns in the contexts of Black filmmaking in this country lies at the heart of what others have termed "the disappearing histories" of Black Canadians. Because celebration is often the main response, numerous opportunities are missed to articulate the ways in which these works either elaborate Canadian film history, mimic it, or revise and extend it.

In short, the celebration of the works outside of a sustained discussion that moves beyond

From the Nightwood Theatre production of Harlem Duet, 1997, a play written and directed by Djanet Sears. Photo by Cylla von Tiedemann. Courtesy of Nightwood Theatre.

individual accomplishments and exceptional achievement impedes what might be the works' real impact on the place of its production. The dearth of an adequate response to Clement Virgo's adaptation of Virginia Hamilton's *The Planet of Junior Brown* (1997, Filmworks and CBC) is a case in point. While the film has won several awards, most of the reviews fail to consider its impact in terms of larger cultural questions. What does Virgo's adaptation of an African American story into a Canadian and distinctly Torontonian multicultural narrative tell us about the place of Black filmmaking in Canada? To think about a concern such as this requires that the work cannot merely be discussed on its own merits, but has to be brought into conversation with a larger set of cultural issues and concerns.

Differently but conceptually related, is a recent bio-documentary on the naturalist, found object, Black portraiture of photographer Michael Chambers (*The Photographer: An Artist's Journey*, dir. Anton Wagner, 1997). The documentary showcased

...the mainstream disseminators of information can proceed to engage in a pernicious kind of skin trade whereby any Black person willing to put themselves on the line can be called upon to speak.

and celebrated Chambers' photography and it attempted to offer some analysis of his work, its impact and his place within Canadian art. Celebrating the individual artist is very important. Chambers stands out as a unique and vital Canadian artist. However, the documentary was positioned within the old anti-racism model of exceptionality which suggests that those who stand out should be given attention and recognition on hegemonic terms. It could have been much more subversive, however, had the presence of other Black artists in Canada been considered in relation to what is clearly a slighting of Chambers by the arts establishment. It is this kind of political and cultural criticism that provokes the conversation the bio-documentary meant to pose: when will Black Canadian artists be taken seriously at home for doing "Black art?" When a wider net is cast the importance of the question signals a much broader and urgent concern about the place of Black arts in the Canadian national imaginary.

So, for example, how would we talk about Maestro's current return, and his sampling of white Canadian rock acts to round out his commentary as he continues to produce a hip hop sound/song which is deftly Canadian, but gestures all the while to something else? How do we make sense of Governor General award-winner Djanet Sears' *Harlem Duet* (1997), beyond the play's formal qualities? *Harlem Duet* signals a different take on the relationship between locality and outer-national desires. Yet, it is Canadian. What is at issue is how we begin to build a critical record that helps to make sure that works both good and bad survive beyond summarized reviews and celebrations.

In an essay discussing the films of Jennifer Hodge de Silva, longtime lone Black film critic Cameron Bailey called her work "a cinema of duty" (*CineAction*, no. 23, 1990–91) in an attempt to demonstrate the relationship between her realist social NFB-influenced documentaries and the desire to represent and speak into a space for Blackness in Canada. I want to appropriate Bailey's phrase and suggest that Black expressive culture in Canada currently requires "a duty of critical engagement." Failing to do so, Black expressive culture would remain but an extended "flavour of the month" with little historical and contemporary frames for making sense of it, and little evidence of the ways in which its impact on the larger society might be understood. All that will be left in the archive for future generations will be five-hundred word reviews.

In effect, I am calling for a break with celebration and simultaneously suggesting that whether a critic loves or dislikes a piece of work, the evaluative criteria for judging the critic should be the kind of effort that was made to secure a serious engagement with the work. Many of us engage in serious dialogue about black expressive culture but we often don't write it in public places. So, let's put an end to the Black cultural criticism of the coffee shops, the restaurants, the telephone and e-mail across this country. Let's "out" Black Canadian cultural criticism as a viable and urgent necessity. Cultural debate and critique is an act vital to the life of Black expressive works and an act that acknowledges that to seriously engage with cultural expression is labour well worth the time, energy, pleasure and debate.

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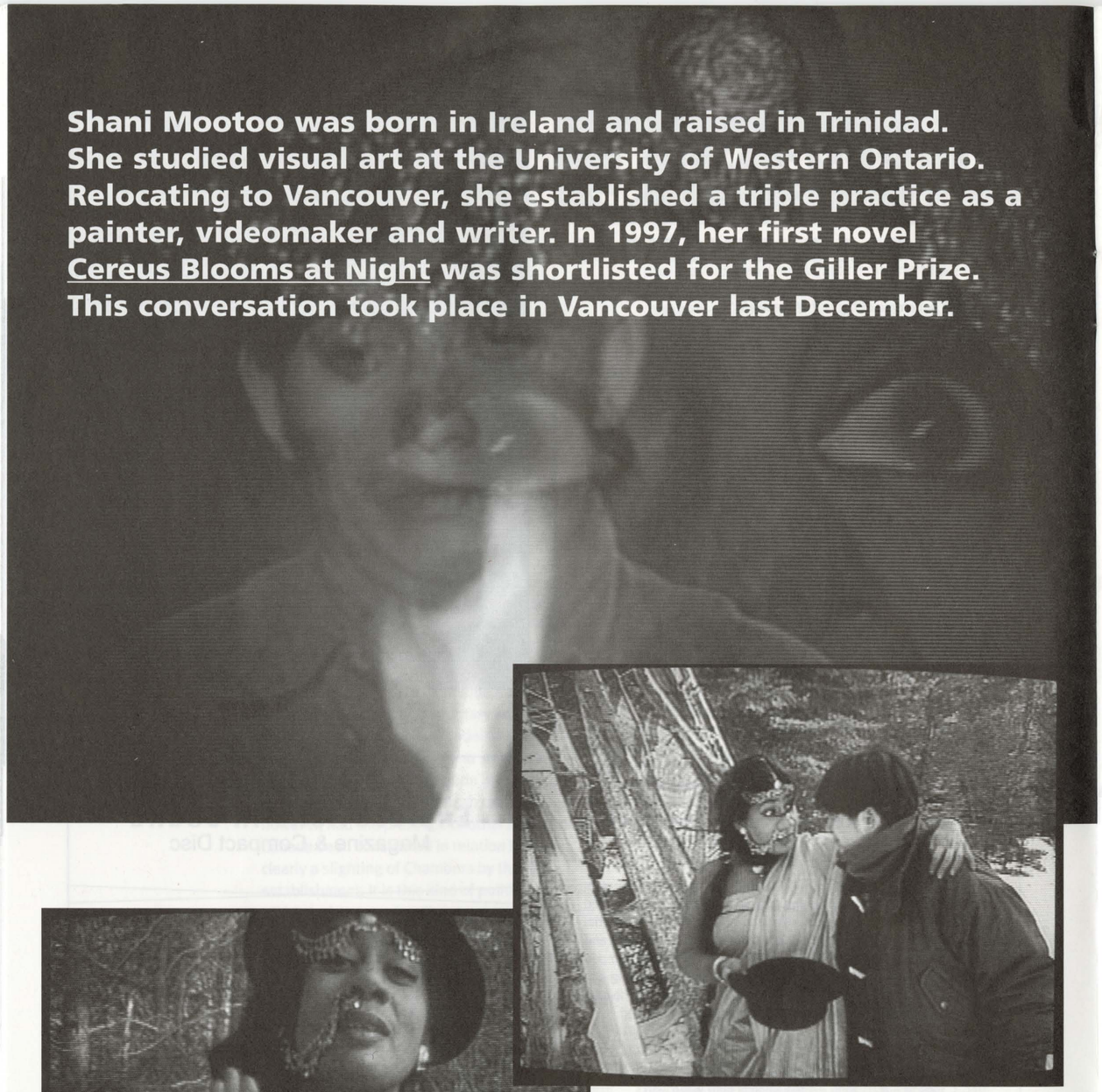
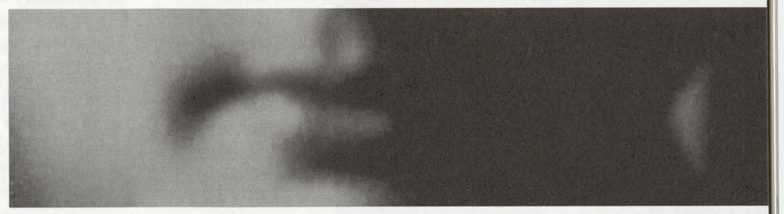
Rinaldo Walcott is a member of the FUSE Editorial Board.

Shani Mootoo was born in Ireland and raised in Trinidad. She studied visual art at the University of Western Ontario. Relocating to Vancouver, she established a triple practice as a painter, videomaker and writer. In 1997, her first novel Cereus Blooms at Night was shortlisted for the Giller Prize. This conversation took place in Vancouver last December.



Video stills from *The Wild Woman in the Woods*, Shani Mootoo, 1993, 14:00 min.
Courtesy of V Tape, Toronto.



Shani Mootoo

SHIFTING PERCEPTIONS, CHANGING PRACTICES

INTERVIEW WITH SARINDAR DHALIWAL

Sarindar Dhaliwal: You are a painter, video artist and writer. It appears that the writing has taken you, critically and in terms of success, so much further than painting or video. Are video and painting the poor cousins of writing?

Shani Mootoo: Not poor cousins, but a different family. I realize I unintentionally entered an industry.

SD: Do you feel you are a commodity in that world?

SM: That's just the way that particular industry works. In the field of visual art making we thrive on and take pride in our autonomy, and even in our struggles to be seen and heard. It's as if those struggles spur us on creatively. For most of us the end result of a body of work is a show in a non-profit art gallery. The gallery is subsidized, not profit-based, unlike the publishing industry.

The visual arts and video communities are small, and the audiences tiny, compared to this kind of writing that I have found myself doing. We, in video and visual art, play to each other. We're the makers and each other's audience and we have a kind of inside language, verbal as well as of the trade. It's a very closed, insular world, comfortable in a lot of ways. Writing is a production, a business, a whole other animal.

To respond more directly to your statement: while on one hand it's a struggle for many artists to get their work seen, I don't understand why we in visual art are so attached to hardship, why we scorn visibility beyond our community of artists. We seem to have imposed on ourselves a limit on just how successful we may become. Beyond necessity, there is something seductive—even arrogant—about struggling.

SD: Are you being harassed to produce the second novel?

SM: Not exactly. I came to writing this novel by accident and just because it has been somewhat successful doesn't mean that now I've decided that I'm a writer. The idea for the work comes to me in a very specific medium. In truth though, I've come to quite love writing. It probably has a slight edge over visual art and video making. I find writing to be a form in which I can delve more deeply into a subject than I've been able to do in video or visual art. I have not yet taken the time to make visual art pieces or a video that might have the depth and focus that I achieved in *Cereus Blooms at Night*.

It's ironic that I first fell in love with art making, in my earliest youth, because of its possibilities for ambiguity, of metering out, not spilling, what was bottled up inside of me.

SD: When I first met you, you were labeled an Indo-Caribbean, lesbian, visual artist based in Vancouver.

SM: When a description of me was to be made public I said to curators and publishers that I did not want to be identified by race or sexuality. I didn't mind if they said that I was born in Dublin, grew up in Trinidad, and am now a Canadian. It is not that I did not want it publicized that I am of Indian origin or that I am lesbian; my works so clearly indicate these. Allowing these facts to seep out of my work is more in line with my preferred form of political activism. When the work comes first, its author second, there is a hyper-normalizing of content. Though, to name oneself upfront, before the work is entered, is another valid and necessary strategy of activism.

SD: It's interesting to see work made about identity that is not racially defined. An artist whose work I admire made a piece, emotionally charged and full of love and poignancy, about his father's journey from a European country to Canada. I look at that work and am reminded of why I make art. Sometimes you forget why you're an artist and then you see someone's work and it moves you to remember. Other times I find that I get irritated thinking that we've already dealt with all of this personal and social history. I'm trying to figure out why I resist a lot of identity-based work. It usually has something to do with my standards of quality. It has to be damn good, not second rate or not quite pushed enough or not sincere. It doesn't help that it is hard to criticize that work because it deals with sensitive, emotionally charged issues.

Video stills from *Her Sweetness Lingers*, Shani Mootoo, 1994, 12:00 min.
Courtesy of V Tape, Toronto.

SM: I had been making art for a long time in Vancouver. When my work was exhibited, it was reviewed and words like folksy and naive were used. I slowly realized that my work was being raced. I wasn't even being identified as Trinidadian because Trinidadian didn't compute here. According to my skin colour I was Indian or, as is colloquially said here, Punjabi. That eventually changed into South Asian. It was also at that particular time that I recognized an opportunity for me to speak and it had, initially, to be from that platform. When I wrote *Out On Main Street* I asked Press Gang publishers not to market me as a lesbian or as an Indian. I was aware from the very beginning that if I allowed myself to be labeled in a particular way I would carry that as a burden for a very long time.

There was that period when groups of people were being encouraged to make what got called art in order to give access to people of different skin colour, different backgrounds, sexualities and so on. Not everyone asked was an artist, but I believe that people were indeed being given opportunities to be heard. It was the art galleries that provided that space, so the medium of the voices was deemed art. It seemed like there was a period when curators suddenly got very excited because they had spotted a person of colour and were saying, "oh, there's a person who's brown or black, or who's from some kind of Asian background and is a lesbian—let's catch that one!" and those attributes were enough to qualify one to make an artwork. Without that step in Canadian art history, moving forward would have been impossible.

SD: Students, and not necessarily students of colour, complain that their teachers are trying to force them to make work that is either about social issues or their background. When I was in school, it was the exact opposite. I was always told that I couldn't make work that was about the personal. It was the reverse; they wanted me to make very formal work or work that fit into the movements of the time. The students that always got ahead in school were the ones who mimicked Pop Art or Minimalism. You weren't allowed to be weird, quirky, personal or autobiographical; there is now a shift but it is almost as restrictive.

SM: I didn't become an artist in order to deal with identity issues. Since that was a point of access several years ago for a

Cover image from the novel *Cereus Blooms at Night*, Shani Mootoo, (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1998). Previously published by Press Gang Publishers (Vancouver), 1996.

lot of people and the most vibrant thing that was happening in ages in art across the country, there were curators, institutional administrators and critics who wanted to be part of it. If you notice, however, serious collectors of Canadian art are not collecting that period—such an important part of the country's history of art—of work by artists of colour. This work has radically changed the nature of Canadian art, but there is no collection of it. To me that is mind-boggling. One of my strong hopes for the country is that there will be a comprehensive collection of that work, not merely as documentation of a moment in the artistic history of this country but because a lot of fabulous work, exhibited boldly though untouted, has come out of that movement.

New generations of artists use the same tired language and strategies. There is much mimicry, which I suppose can be flattering to the older generations of artists; but as activism, it is lazy and sure to fail in its intent. Screaming is still a common strategy—totally useless these days. I believe that it has, in fact, never been effective. On the other hand, when a person who is young at art gets to speak out for her/his first few times it is not far-fetched that s/he might not know the potential of her/his own voice, and might feel it necessary to scream out what has not been personally said by her/him before—even if it has been said by someone else. There was a time when soul-baring type testimony was important. But even people of colour are bored with this strategy. I think it's time to get back to demanding of ourselves the integrity of the artwork first. However, curators, teachers, even publishers are still encouraging people to tell the same old-same old. It's tried and true. It is a language that they themselves have finally caught up with, mastered, and are comfortable with. They tend not to be the ones changing the language of political activism, but are mastering it as fast as artists put it out. If activist-artists are to remain vital, we must insidiously enter the mind of an audience. As audiences' perceptions and comfort levels regarding our stories peak, so must our strategies to tell those stories change. The fact is that in this war of sorts we are the underdogs; it is useless to demand to be heard—much wiser to be manipulative, seductive!

Drawing attention to issues of oppression remains urgent. If we get too cocky and think that just because a handful of people of colour are now visible we're well on our way in this country to equality with the dominant cultures, we would be foolish. The answer is not to abandon the issues but to revamp language, conversation, volume, even as we repeat ourselves.

SD: Many activists, though good people, make the waters even cloudier, doing more damage than good.

SM: Some build incredible bridges. The kinds of activism that we are talking about mustn't die. And the same people can't keep doing it year in and year out. It's exhausting. Someone's got to keep fanning those fires. There is a responsibility not merely to agitate, but to do so effectively. This is where I might be called a snob or elitist as an artist. But I do believe that if you have something to say, you should hone your skills to be able to say it so there is actual pleasure on the listener's part in hearing it. By pleasure I mean reception. What interests me first and foremost is the quality of work, and if the work is good I am willing to be sucked in by the bias of the content. It's much more effective; it's a strategy for communication, about not just spilling your guts but being listened to.

SD: Activism has shed some light on a number of side issues such as jealousies.

SM: Right. Like I've got this room right now and I don't want anybody else to share in it. In fact, it's really important for me that there not be just one of us. When there is only one out there it's hard to know if that one is a token. I love having the company of Anita Rau Badami, Larissa Lai, Shyam Selvadurai, M.J. Vassanji, Shameena Senaratnee, to name a few, so that our work can form a conversation and make our presence real and meaningful. Besides, "competition" can be healthy; competition with your own kind in particular keeps you on your toes.

SD: It's a shame we can't have more open discussions around some of these peripheral issues. White people can't

Video still from *Lest I Burn*, Shani Mootoo, 1991, 5:45 min. Courtesy of V Tape.

speak because they're accused of being racist and then we are accused of being white inside. This suppression is fearful and dangerous and sometimes cultivated by the activism that is supposed to be supportive.

SM: I think one of the side issues is class. To not acknowledge class difference amongst immigrant peoples of colour creates a dangerously false playing field for us. It is foolish to assume that everyone of colour is of the same class background, but it does serve us and the dominant culture not to mention class.

If we get too cocky and think that just because a handful of people of colour are now visible we're well on our way in this country to equality with the dominant cultures, we would be foolish.

SD: Why do you think that we don't talk about class the way we can talk about sexuality and race in art? Here in Canada, children are encouraged from very early on to see differences, but only in terms of acknowledging different cultures. In Britain, where I as an immigrant and working class child was taught only about the life of the aristocracy, nobody talked about miners or steel workers. It's no wonder that the debate around class is underdeveloped.

SM: There is a solidarity that we have as people who are oppressed because of race or sexuality. If we start to talk about class, then we'll fragment. In a way, colour is class. And in terms of the dominant culture, if the class issue is ignored they can more easily reign. You see, it sounds petty and ridiculous to say that one is of a higher or lower class background than someone else. But it's the intimidation that I am wary of. It silences, and creates false solidarities and expectations amongst us. Silencing leads to lying. The problem for me arises when it is assumed that a person of colour who makes it signifies that any person of colour can make it.

SD: You are featured on the cover of *BC Book World* this month. The caption says something like "for ten years she struggled with sexuality, art and race and now she is one of Canada's hottest new writers..."

SM: If you look at that in depth, it somehow says that if one perseveres one can overcome race, gender and marginalization. What ignoring the class issue does is perpetuate that myth. In my own case, coming from a very privileged background gave me the courage or stupidity, however you choose to look at it, to continue making my artwork for fifteen years when I was more or less ignored and could barely pay rent or buy food. In such a case no matter how little money or immediate security one has, one also has the sense of someone, somewhere, to fall back on. Security is never really far away and poverty is a game. The ability to persevere in that way is sometimes a luxury borne of privilege. For someone who comes from a different background, poverty and insecurity may not be things to flirt with.

Race/queerness are not completely or necessarily the subject of my work. In *Cereus* I had no overt or burning agenda. I was not trying to tell the world something about race, sexuality, immigration or indentured labourers. The story is completely fictional, something I enjoyed inventing. It was like a flower that just kept unfolding and unfolding. It was a magical experience because I didn't know how all these seemingly disparate parts that I was compelled to flush out —like the Pohpoh character who kept running out in the middle of the night and going into peoples' houses— connected to the rest of the novel. It took me three years to figure out how to build that bridge.

I'm at a place right now where I feel a certain kind of pressure: I feel that I can't afford to do a piece of work that is shoddy. It has to be good. What does "good" mean? What was successful for a lot of people was the narration of the story by a gay man who turns out, in the end, not to be exactly gay. Gayness has been a positive source of intrigue for several reviewers. The next novel may be commercially unsuccessful: so far there is no lesbian or gay content, but it's a story that I so dearly want to invent and to tell. I would rather work toward critical than commercial success, and I suppose the first critic is myself. Commercial success is rather sweet though, I will admit!

Reviewers have been acutely aware of brownness in the book, of the author's skin colour, of the heat of the sun, of the faddishness of some of the issues in writing. While in visual art and video we've been dealing for a long time with many of the issues that I touch on in the book, it's all quite new—though not to writing and publishing—in terms of how it's picked up by the larger audience of readers and reviewers.

What causes me to laugh are the odd assumptions that are made about my intentions. In England, an interviewer, with a knowing insider's smirk on her face, told me that she was aware that I was part of a trend in new Indian novel writing. I explained that I hadn't really paid much attention to contemporary writing in India. The interviewer insisted that I, like many writers from India, was consciously writing against a particular tradition. She had seen my skin colour and decided that I had something to do with India. She had a theory and was intent on applying it no matter if it fitted or not. If anything at all, it would be more meaningful to look at my writing as coming from Trinidad. Funny thing is, she is second-generation Indian. I wanted to oblige her for this reason, but I also resisted being a theory, particularly when it was so fabricated. I wish she hadn't fallen for that kind of imperial packaging and compartmentalizing.

The book is also rammed into the vein of "magic realism." It's an easy phrase to explain events and situations that are unusual. As a Trinidadian or Canadian my situation is radically different from the life-and-death political situation that existed in certain South American countries and that birthed magic realism as a literary device. We don't have that situation in Trinidad or in Canada. But nowadays it's easy and fashionable to talk of contemporary Canadian writing as magic realism. That's a sloppiness, laziness on the part of critics and reviewers that I find irritating. I wish they would research magic realism's origins and invent a new term or phrase that applies more specifically to our situation here in Canada—one that merits that kind of analysis. I often think that writers of true magic realism who might have heard my book (or other Canadian novels) referred to as magic realism would be incensed by such insensitivity.

SD: One of the reasons that this term magic realism keeps cropping up is because the imagery in your writing is so penetrating. I read Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* while working in an onion factory in Holland. A horrible job, starting at six in the evening through to six in the morning. I had never worked in a factory before and at the beginning of this job I thought, "Oh, this will be okay because I'll be able to think about lots of things while I'm at this belt." After one-and-a-half days I had exhausted everything that I had ever wanted to think about. I would go home in the morning to where I was camping, sleeping in a tent, and would have the most incredible dreams. I would dream that the sky was raining little white pickled onions. With your images of moths and blossoms, I am transported to similar dreamy landscapes that permeate waking and sleeping.

SM: In *Cereus* Ambrose Mohanty sleeps all month except for one day when he gets up to prepare a basket of food to send to an ex-lover. It's an exaggeration for emphasis. There's nothing magical about it, nor about the boy who was born a girl. My exaggerations are what people call magic realism, but they're actually extreme exaggerations of real life situations. Someone who's depressed in reality might sleep all day long and only get up for three hours of the day or may not actually sleep, but close themselves off in a darkened

room. It's depression. That's Ambrose. People change their entire lives around as a matter of survival so that they take care of their family; but really they're taking care of themselves and ensuring their own security. What's fascinating is that it's a common thing. These are exaggerations of psychologically logical situations.

SD: I tend to make work that's about little things in my life, like how I felt as a seven-year-old when I saw a peony growing.

SM: To me, there's something very political in that. Any choice we make says something about our desire for position in the world. It's political, even if you're not acting with an overtly political intent or consciousness. My own raison d'être as an artist was not activism. I found myself in an art world full of prejudice that was shocking to me and, as a matter of survival, I had to speak out about it. But speaking out about it is not an end in itself; it's a means towards being able to do the work that I had originally wanted to do. So the balance is that we must not stop the activism but somehow the art itself must have an old-fashioned integrity. I too keep demanding space to do works like that—about my love of plants, gardening, being in the outdoors. Or just being in love. In *Her Sweetness Lingers*, for instance, there's a woman jumping on a trampoline, looking through some shrubbery at another woman. The voice-over is about her desire for this woman, but she's absolutely terrified of expressing it. It's about that feeling you come to know over time and over many different relationships—that the moment you pronounce love is also the beginning of its end. One is bound to break up: that's just the way the world works. It's a pretty jaded view. It's a lack of trust, not expecting to get the love you want. That's what the fear is. There's a line that says "I'm afraid of dying" and the fear is of love itself dying. But at no time is it about the fear of expressing a lesbian love. The woman's problem is not that she is a lesbian, it is that she is afraid of love itself. The word lesbian is never mentioned in it. Not bringing notice to the fact that this is lesbian love, not asking permission, are in themselves very political statements and acts.

Shani Mootoo: photo by Kathy High.

SD: One of the things that is apparent to everyone watching that video, now that we're talking about these labels again, is that almost everyone who's watching that video knows that it's probably about lesbian love.

SM: Well, there's a woman looking at another woman.

SD: Because it's by you. That's the assumption that people would make. They wouldn't think that it was about another kind of love.

SM: You're talking about expectations. Being lesbian or a woman or of colour do not consume me. There is much more to my life than those vital though compartmentalizing aspects of myself. Being lesbian and woman doesn't preclude an interest in or love of men, or an interest in heterosexuality. Being of colour and an activist doesn't mean that I have no thoughts about whiteness or have no life in a white world, or that life there is all bad and oppressed. There are stories that I want to tell that may have not a thing to do with being lesbian or of colour, but of course being lesbian/of colour is the foundation or world view from which those stories will undoubtedly arise.

Every time I talk of white as the dominant culture I experience a twinge. I live in Vancouver where the power base has recently become very complicated. I am talking about the power of the recent Hong Kong Chinese presence. The change here has been incredibly swift. Previously I said that not all people of colour were of the same class background and I know from the earlier days of activism that on the front line were a good number of artists of Chinese origin who by dint of colour were of a lower class than the then dominant culture in general. And to just lump the word Chinese in with white denies their real experience, and the complexity of "Chinese." I don't want to ignore the new power relations that I see here, but I haven't yet got a language to deal with it. That's because it was previously simplified as an us-and-them situation, and now us and them has gotten mixed up.

SD: By 1992, I had met only one other South Asian female artist. I now know lots of South Asian women artists in Toronto and abroad. One of the things that I notice about them, that is different from me, is that because they are almost an entire ten or fifteen years younger than me, they have this completely different attitude. "I'm here and you better listen to me." After meeting them I realized that I have spent all of my life hiding, being in the background, possibly because there were no role models for my generation.

SM: That's another very good reason why there must be room at the top for more than just one of us. More of us up there normalizes that position, gives credence to us within and without. Those young women's privilege is to boldly stand up and demand "look at me, listen to me, I am here," and it comes from the work that earlier generations did. We didn't have that kind of privilege. We did have a different kind of privilege, though. Our visibility came about not just because of the activism that we ourselves did, but at a time when administrators and funding bodies had already had their minds and ears pried open by the past generation of artists who didn't even get to show their work but were quietly tearing their hair out, talking, teaching, begging. This is similar to the feminist movement; young women, including lesbians, have the privilege to stand up and scream that they're not feminist. They don't remember how recently, not even five years ago, we had difficulty in publicly declaring ourselves, in words or dress or on the street, walking hand in hand with another woman. On the other hand, while the activism must not stop, and we need to remain diligent and vigilant no matter what kinds of changes we see because we know the cycle of backlash, those younger artists are in a new position and it is from there that they must speak. We can't expect them to speak our lines. One could only hope that they would not be so foolish to think that they are indomitable. They have the responsibility of "backlash" in their hands.

Because of the success that *Cereus* and even my videos have had it would be easy for me, if I were a different person perhaps, to abandon the political. The subtle message conveyed by the *BC Book World* cover...

SD: Being marginalized by race, color, sexuality and poverty...

SM: ...is that you can overcome those things. The expectation then could well be that I should shut up about these things because I no longer have these problems. I have access, so who am I to talk, and this attitude would come from the same groups that I've worked with all these years. The subtext for that would be "you've sold out." Or it could be "you're doing well, so you have probably abandoned us." Or it could be seen as some kind of false and arrogant benevolence that I'm still talking about access. Access has not been accomplished simply because a few people are now visible. If we get lazy or too confident we might just find it slipping away from us. One successful novel—the only one I have written—doesn't make me feel too secure.

SD: Success brings with it a lot of accusations: Third World diva, token representative at an institutional level.

SM: Sometimes the only way you can get work done is by accepting the position of being a token. I know very well that I was a token this, that and the other. That is fine... to an extent. In filling voids, I was being used, but I benefited too. I took opportunities that opened doors for me. It's a foundation on which to build.

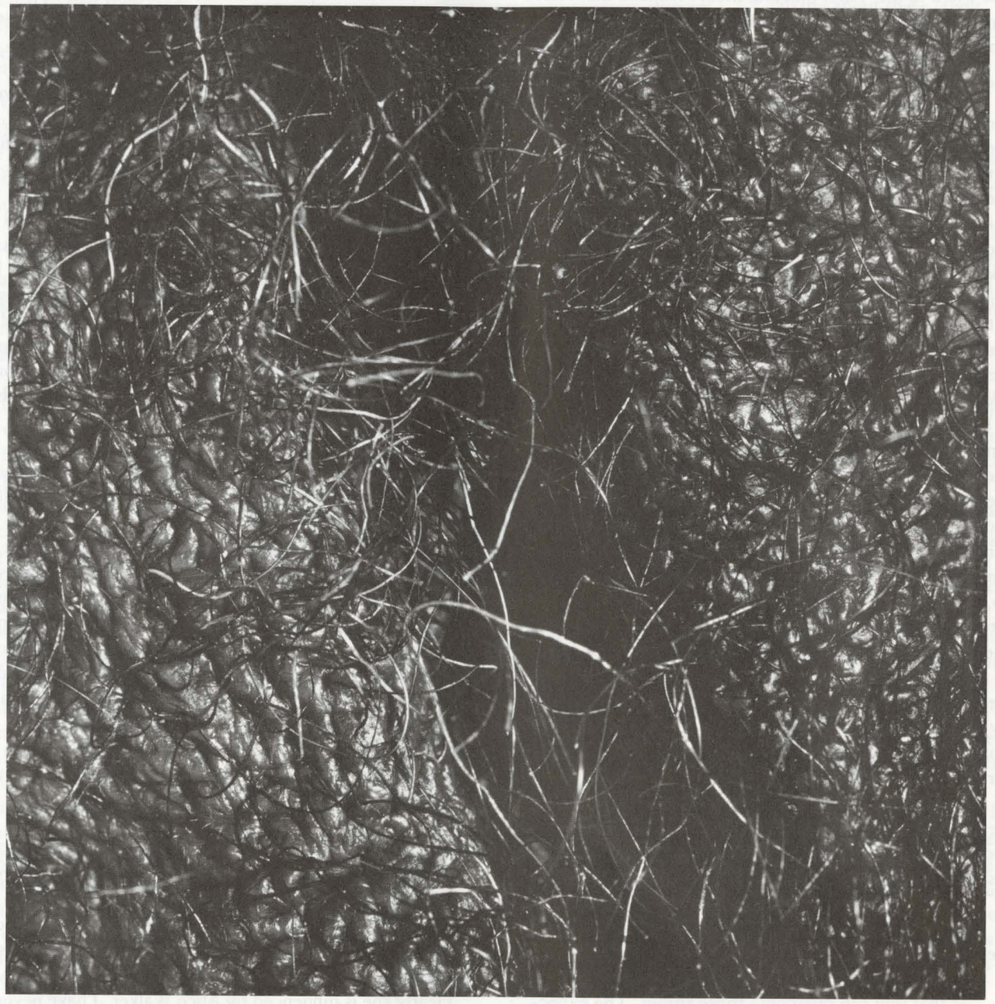
When I see that a person of colour has made it, I want to know everything about that person's life, I want to know how she or he got there. S/he becomes a hope for me. I could stop and say that I have permission to do anything because I've received a certain amount of visibility, and can stop all the fighting now. But that's not true; the basic power system or structure of the way that the country runs, on every level, hasn't changed and I am still a minority. That kind of success can be fickle.

SD: The shame is that so many artists, in order to achieve that visibility, are convinced they must have overt, political content in their work.

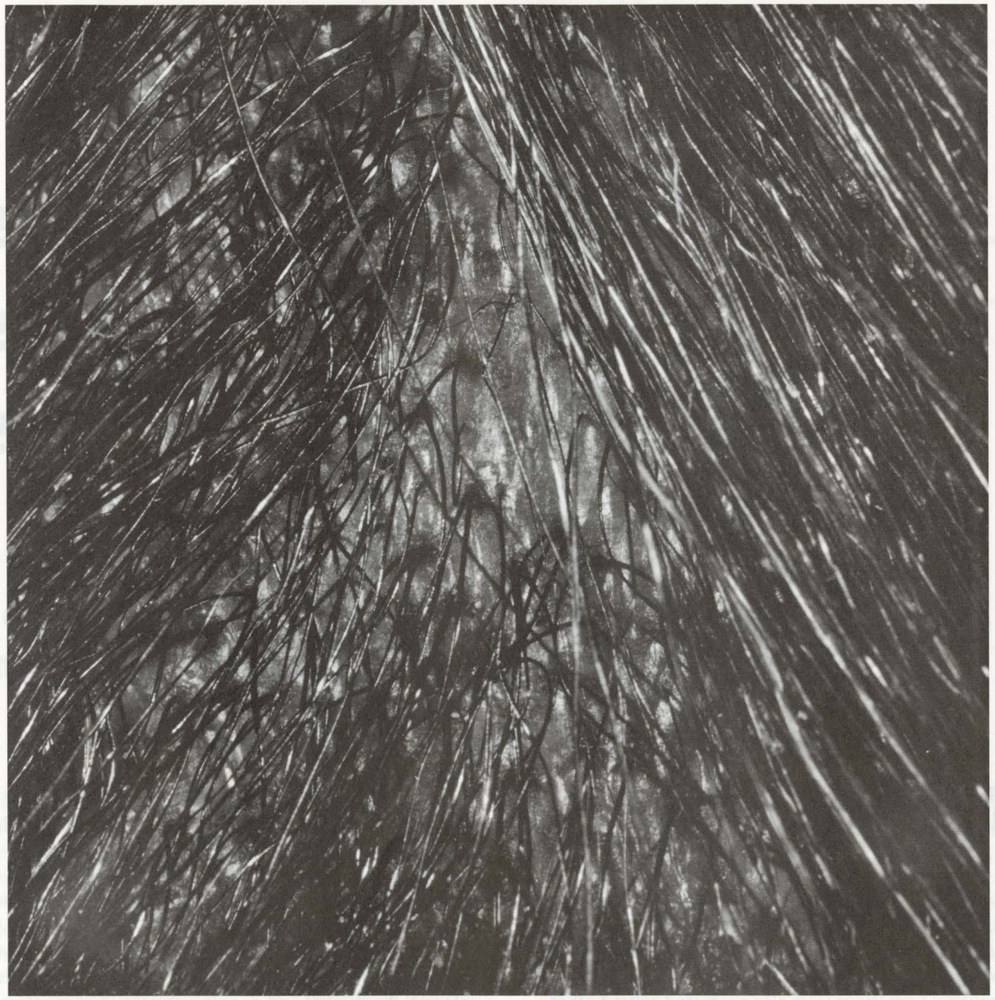
The other thing that is really problematic is that, especially with installation work, techniques, strategies and materials begin to belong to particular artists. If there is sound or text, artists are continually having to come up with gimmicky ways to insert those elements in order not to be referenced to other artists. Even though I did get the idea to use pigment from Anish Kapoor, I have been to India and what really struck me there was those pyramids of powdered pigment, shaped into cones. Yet no artist in the whole of the world can use powdered pigment without being referred back to Anish Kapoor.

SM: So what's wrong with being referred back to him? When links are made from my work to some other person's, even if I don't know that person's work, a conversation and broader context ensues—the jumping-off platform widens. The world of information is so interconnected now. It's impossible not to be referenced. So often reviewers say "clearly she is influenced by Alice Walker." I have never read Alice Walker. I like the idea that there are lots of people who may not know each other's work, but are working along very similar lines because we're part of a cosmic interconnectedness. There's something reassuring for me in that. I don't think that there's anything that's completely original and I think that striving to do things that are completely original gets us in trouble. It paralyzes us. I think that we should accept the elements of this time that we're in right now and work with them.

Sarindar Dhaliwal is a visual artist living in Toronto.



My soul announces its comings and goings through



this junction of bones. A dragonfly riding the wind.

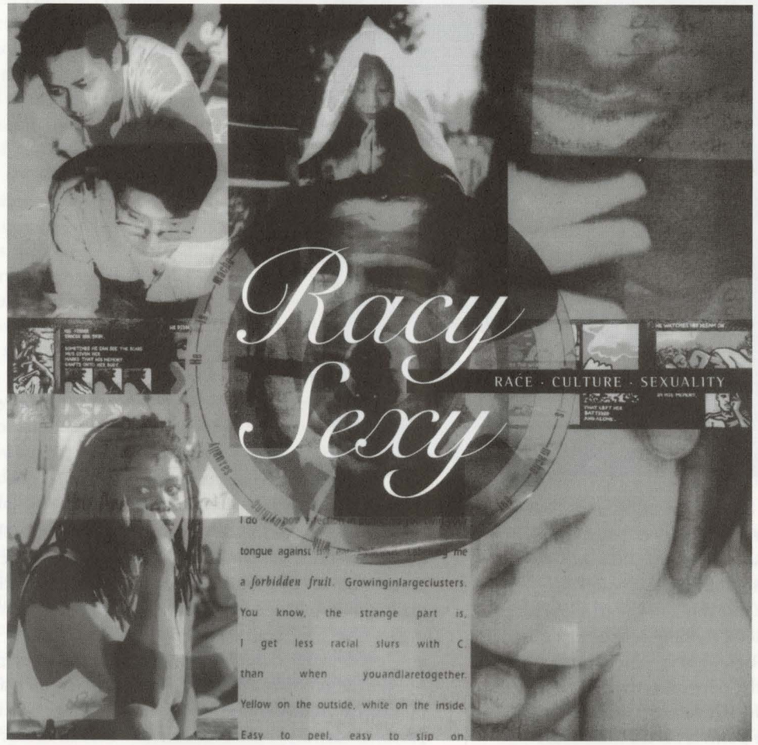
Some Keywords and Arguments in Cultural Politics

by Sean Lokaisingh-Meighoo and Arif Noorani

Festivals and community arts organizations emerged in the late '80s and early '90s in response to new political formations around racial, gender and sexual identities as well as the failure of the organized left to address issues of culture and representation. The types of organizations that emerged lay claim to representing communities, such as lesbians and gays (later Queers), women, people of colour, Jewish and First Nations people. New political formations were also organized around other interests, including the environment and animal rights.

These formations came out of this particular historical and cultural juncture, and were developed according to immediate and specific political problems. The historical and cultural juncture in which cultural activists work today has since shifted in a number of interrelated ways: these communities have gone through a process of political growth and change; new communications technologies have effected not only how we relate between and within communities, but also how we define community; economic trends have emerged that emphasize non-local economies; and the state has embarked on a program of defunding of the arts. As such, the nature of cultural politics itself has also shifted. Yet there has not been a concerted and coordinated effort to re-examine the concepts, rules and assumptions that have been developed to guide the work of cultural politics.

This article in itself, of course, does not constitute such a concerted and coordinated effort. Rather, it adds to the informal discussions and ongoing projects that are already under way in the day-to-day work of doing cultural politics. For the rules and assumptions that govern how we do cultural politics are up for redefinition. What we want to do in this article is to problematize some of the key concepts that have come to define cultural politics, locally and wherever these types of formations occur. As cultural activists, the theories we present in this article have been put into practice primarily at Desh Pardesh (a South Asian arts and political organization that coordinates an annual festival/conference and other ongoing projects), where we first worked together. We have worked as members of



Cover from the *Racy Sexy* catalogue (1995). The catalogue contained essays and documentation of the multi-disciplinary exhibition, held in 1993. Sponsored by the Chinese Cultural Centre of Vancouver.

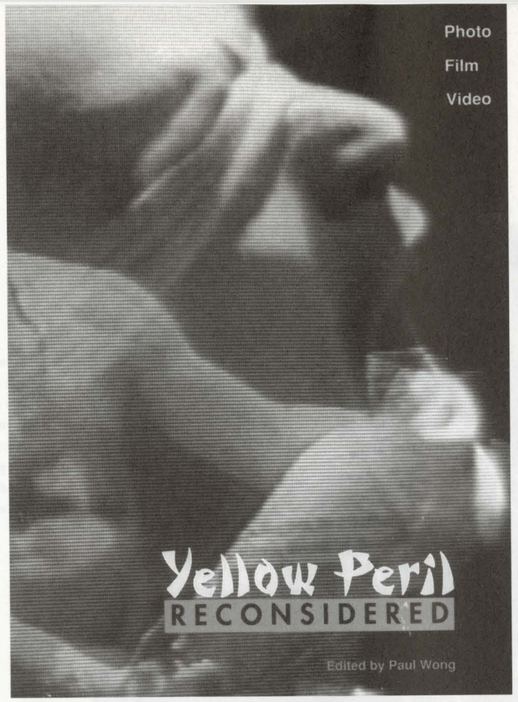
staff, boards and committees in a variety of cultural and political organizations, as well as in the fields of film and video presentation, videomaking, musical performance and literary readings.

While the concepts we critique in this article form the underpinnings of Desh Pardesh, they are by no means limited to this organization. Certainly, Desh Pardesh borrows heavily from the cultural practices and political ideologies initially developed in the late '80s, but these practices and ideologies have influenced a whole host of festivals and community arts organizations that also emerged in that period. Within this cultural politics scene, notions of community, democracy, grassroots, leadership, art and the term culture itself are often used as if their possible meanings and practical implications are commonly understood and already settled. We are not setting out to dismiss these concepts entirely or to negate whatever useful purposes they might have already served. Indeed, our own ideas and propositions in this article are informed by the very problematics that these concepts have introduced into political organizing. What we are doing, then, is pushing these concepts to their limits. In this effort, some of them will survive, others may not.

Community cannot be the basis for political organizing.

The concept of community is a basic notion, a fundamental principle of cultural politics. Precisely because of this, it often remains unchallenged, and yet it is one of the most indefinable and contentious of political concepts. Community is often referenced as a homogeneous entity, in its more complex forms made up of heterogeneous constituencies, but ultimately unified through a common identity. Community operates as a subculture in relation to the mainstream. It is easily represented, its interests transparent.

Let us begin our critique of this concept of community, as you say in cultural politics, "from the ground up." The everyday workings of community organizations often involve a small group of people, a closed circle of political



Cover from the *Yellow Peril* catalogue (1995), for a cross-Canada tour held in 1990–91.
Organized & published by On Edge, Vancouver.

inbreeding, who define what a particular organization is and which community it serves. Of course, this group constitutes only a small portion of that community, let alone of "society" in general. Just think of the *ad hoc* ways in which boards, staff, committees, funding bodies and other organizational positions are determined, whether by appointment or hiring, and the networks, the cliques in effect, that end up reproducing themselves in these organizational processes. Now, our point is *not* that this must change. For left and identity groups will always, or at least for the next long while, have to work this way, for there are few people who are willing to spend the time and energy that is necessary to work in these organizations, often for low or no wages. There are few people indeed with this sort of commitment.

However, the naive notion of inclusivity through which community is supposed to work is plainly incompatible with these everyday workings of community organizations. It quickly becomes apparent that community is as exclusive as it is inclusive. That is, specific communities are formed through qualifications for inclusion as much as by criteria for exclusion. In this sense, we could go further and say that community works primarily through exclusion. For only in constructing boundaries, building garrisons around specific communities, may people be admitted and welcomed into them.

Of course, when we say that community cannot be the basis for political organizing, we do not mean that notions of community cannot play a part in cultural politics. For these exclusionary practices are quite inescapable, and are in some ways necessary for group cohesion and political effectiveness. What we want to problematize is the reliance on community as a foundational principle for political organizing. This reliance informs such concepts as "community organizing" and "community politics," "community events" and "community-based" work. Foundational principles of political organizing are more effective when they are not limited by crude demographics, rules of entry based on personal identity. However conventional an idea it seems, cultural activists are better informed by a more democratic principle for political organizing, a principle that is far less rigid in dealing with concepts as well as people themselves, that would make what now qualifies as coalition work seem rather commonplace.

Coalitions reproduce the boundaries that they bridge.

As it has come to be understood, the concept of coalition is not the answer to the present problems of cultural politics. While certainly useful for specific projects in terms of committing resources and developing outreach strategies, coalitions are actually severely limited in their scope for political transformation. In terms of cross-cultural work, the limit of coalitions concerns the concept of the "cross-cultural" itself—that is, what counts as cross-cultural. For within the logic of cross-cultural coalition work is the presumption that there is already a particular cultural gap to be crossed, a fault to be bridged.

Certainly, different groups need to work with each other. But when communities are set up as coming together and yet remaining distinct even in their coming together, particular cultural boundaries are entrenched. In much cross-cultural coalition work, these boundaries are quite plainly racial. These communities or constituencies are supposed to remain fundamentally the same throughout the process of coalition, and eventually, they are supposed to leave as they came. The coalition model of cultural politics, then, forecloses the possibility of cultural transformation, the reconstitution of community. Coalitions reify the very cultural boundaries that they are designed to overcome.

It quickly becomes apparent that community is as exclusive as it is inclusive. That is, specific communities are formed through qualifications for inclusion as much as by criteria for exclusion.

Yet in the process of coalition, cultural transformation is constantly taking place. Even within the entrenched boundaries of community, what we may also call cross-cultural work is always in process. What sort of cultural boundaries are reproduced, then, is never an ancestral accident but requires deliberate and sustained political effort. For example, the work in which Desh Pardesh participates is based on the notion of South Asian identity. But of course, this form of identity is far from homogeneous. Within Desh Pardesh, Indo-African and Indo-Caribbean people slug it out with each other, not to mention with South Asians from India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, from all the geographic regions and linguistic groups within these countries. We might very well pose the following sort of questions, then: Why is political work involving Indo-Guyanese and Afro-Guyanese people cross-cultural? Why is political work involving non-resident Indians and Indo-Fijians not cross-cultural? Indeed, can we say that any work at all done in the local scene of Toronto is cross-cultural?

Beyond the issue of cross-cultural work, there are also organizational implications of the coalition model that we want to problematize. Let us call this effect of coalition work the "dumbing-down" effect. When coalitions are formed around specific projects or issues, the decision-making process of consensus is often adopted as the most democratic way to resolve the various interests and resulting tensions that different political groups bring to the negotiating table. In this consensus process, individuals or organizations claim to represent particular memberships or constituencies, and act according to their rights as representatives to "stand in" or "speak for" their communities in making final decisions. Consensus operates on a rather radical notion of democracy, but too often, decisions made through this process results in the "lowest common denominator" of political interests. Each group vies for the primacy of its own interests, but no specific proposal by any group is satisfactory to all interests. Thus, each proposal is amended, every statement whittled down or else additional clauses attached, until there are no objections from anyone.

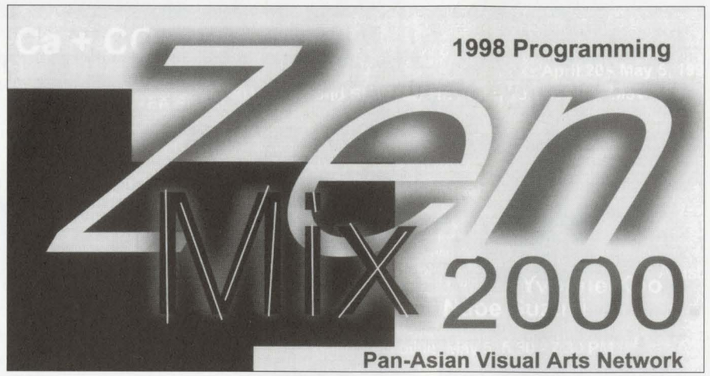
This process too often results in a cornucopia of conflicting ideas, those mandates bursting with empty rhetoric, with which by now we are all too familiar. Even in the best-case scenario where a particular decision is made on a consistent set of assumptions, it may not make any political sense once the players or the circumstances of the coalition change. What too often results is a series of tactical decisions that may be justifiable for one particular moment but do not add up, cannot summarize a coherent political strategy that may guide the work of the coalition in an effective way.

There is no safe space.

There are certain circumstances in which the concept of safe space may be productive. In support groups, discussion groups and coming-out groups, the working principle that racist, sexist or homophobic statements are not permitted is certainly justifiable. Yet even within the logic of safe space, relying on this principle is one of the "unsafest" ways to approach politics for the very simple reason that safety can never be guaranteed, even in politically conscious groups and especially when dealing with multiple issues and identities.

However, the implications of using safe space as an organizational principle go much further than this. In any political formation, certain issues and protocols are devised at specific historical moments in response to particular social pressures. These become crystallized especially if they have proven successful, and may persist long after the particular problems which they addressed have passed and new ones arisen. Meanwhile, on a more interpersonal level, every activist approaches politics with their own histories and interests, preoccupations and anxieties, their own styles of doing politics. These personal styles are formed in the context of certain political formations, and may no longer be appropriate once that context has changed.

In this sense then, the notion of safe space imposes a sort of political fundamentalism, a reluctance to challenge already accepted ways of speaking, acting, dressing, eating politics. The formulation of strict mandates and the cornucopia listings that more earnest projects develop prohibiting various "-isms" and "-archies" lend to a climate where the repression of divergent perspectives is valued, all in the interests of maintaining safe space. Political organizations plainly cannot rely on the concept of safe space as a principle for strategic innovation in an ever-shifting cultural terrain.



Cover of the 1998 Zen Mix 2000 program guide (Toronto).

In short, political organizations cannot be structured like support groups. The history of Desh Pardesh is instructive in considering the limits of safe space. Desh Pardesh germinated in 1988 from Khush, a peer support group for South Asian lesbian and gays (still in existence), with the specific goals of creating an identity within the white mainstream of gay culture as well as within the larger South Asian community. It quickly became apparent by the early '90s that the structures that were inherited from the peer support model were not able to contain the needs and aspirations of the new organization. Influences on and challenges to the organization, such as the integration of non-Queer issues (fundamentalism, communalism, feminism) and the friction between what constitutes art and what constitutes activism, necessarily came up against the confines of then current notions of safety.

In other movements, debates around the meaning of Queer (especially around bisexuality and transgendered notions of sexuality), the relationship between pornography and feminism, and even the very definition of feminism pushed these movements into areas where safe space was not possible. Yet despite the tensions within every political movement, tensions that must generate new styles of doing politics, there is still a tendency to retreat into the security of safe space.

As such, the mandate of safe space prohibits new approaches to politically-sensitive areas, precisely where new approaches are often most needed. In disallowing certain expressions, arguments and, in effect, approaches to political issues, possible strategies of subversion and re-appropriation are foreclosed. Let us recall that "black," for example, was not always a positive marker of identity. On the contrary, it has become such a powerful term now precisely because of its previously negative connotations of evil, vulgarity and filth. Yet with the re-appropriation of this term, these connotations have actually been overturned and in some cases reversed, so that many in our generation barely realize, even deny, that "black" has ever had any negative associations. Cultural activists, then, must be willing to revisit notions of the "offensive" instead of remaining forever on the "defensive," a political strategy which we have already cultivated too well for too long.

The mainstream becomes a dummy that we beat up on to give us the illusion of strength, that we interrogate to secure the comfort of intelligence.

Which came first — the grassroots or the mainstream?

We might say that the point of cultural politics is not to remain at the grassroots level, but to enter and thus change the mainstream. However, even this statement would presume the opposition between these concepts, an opposition that we want to put into question. For both the grassroots and the mainstream exist only in an antagonistic relationship with each other. All too commonly, left culture or identity politics is defined by whatever the mainstream is not, and the grassroots by whatever is excluded from official recognition. Yet the boundaries between these mutually opposed spaces are constantly shifting, and what counts as grassroots is always as ambiguous as what counts as mainstream.

This distinction between the mainstream and the grassroots that we want to problematize is based upon the cultural model of the centre and the margin. This model misses the constant interaction between these two spaces and thus the inherent problem in identifying them. Even within the logic of the grassroots this model is quite reductive, for we might say that the cultural centre is always transformed by its margins. In presuming that the centre forever occupies a position of dominance, we actually discredit the deep influence of marginal cultures such as Black vernacular, gay male camp and women's music, that have become inseparable from mainstream culture. However, even this more sensitive reading of the centre and margin model retains the senses of propriety and purity upon which these categories rely. Indeed, as the concepts of the grassroots and the mainstream circulate in cultural politics, these senses of the proper and the pure are confirmed. They are projected onto mainstream culture, although they have become as foundational a part of any grassroots movement.

The very existence of left culture or identity politics is predicated upon the existence of the mainstream. The mainstream becomes a dummy that we beat up on to give us the illusion of strength, that we interrogate to secure the comfort of intelligence. Those who count as radical, those in touch with the grassroots, are treated as if they are more "advanced," "conscious" or "progressive" than those who do not count as radical, those without the proper credentials. As cultural activists, our family and friends, associates and acquaintances are viewed with a sort of haughty contempt. This position of superiority we equate with living on the margins of society, in the safe space of our communities. In some sense, this is understandable given that many of us have come to cultural politics to escape the isolation and persecution in our lives, which our family and friends were more often than not complicit, if not outright active in supporting.

Yet, however painful it may be at times, we must remember that as much as we challenge what we see as the social norms of mainstream culture, we are their products. Even for those of us who have supposedly detached ourselves from this culture, this detachment is a choice, or if not a choice then a repression. What separates us from the mainstream may be as superficial as the terminology we use, the movies we watch, or the stores we shop at. So, if the point of engaging in cultural politics is to maintain support groups and preserve limited spaces of approval, then the concepts of the grassroots and the mainstream are serving us well. However, if we want to make more of an impact, then we must breach the opposition between them, and radically question the way in which we view both of these dummies.

Culture does not belong in the corner.

In rethinking cultural politics, the concept of culture itself must be reconsidered. Just what happens to the terms on which we do "politics" when it is joined by the "cultural"? Now, there are various notions of culture that currently circulate within the cultural politics scene, and the significant differences between these notions affect the sorts of strategies that are taken up in certain political circuits. In identity politics, culture is commonly used to designate discrete communities based on categories of race, gender or sexuality, while in labour politics, it is regularly used to refer to the social level of the superstructure, which is built upon economic reality. Again, in contrast to both of these concepts, in the arts movement most popular in urban centres such as Toronto, culture is often understood quite in the conventional sense of the arts production industry, an extremely limited meaning of culture, of course.

The notion of culture for which we are arguing straddles these other three notions, yet also opens up new areas for activism. This concept of culture is not based on the radical contempt of the mainstream and its accompanying privileging of marginal forms of arts production. Neither is it based on the preservation of distinct identities. Culture, as we want to use the term, is not the property of any individual or group, nor is culture an artifact. It can only allude to that ongoing process wherein identities, styles and politics are creatively constructed, performed and deconstructed, a process which is always open to contestation, appropriation and improvisation.

Culture, then, is profane. It is not pure, it does not remain untouched by commercialism, capitalism, or any other evil "-isms" (or "-archies"). Cultural politics, as such, must target this arena where our everyday psychic investments are made, in categories that are deeply meaningful to us and which we can never easily escape. We must work not in a field free of corruption, but rather precisely within those spaces where our noble aspirations for freedom and justice are bound up with our petty fixations on fears and dreams, pleasures and fetishes.

We cannot refuse representation.

Like culture, there are many different versions in circulation of the concept of representation. These are strung together in various discourses of cultural politics even though they often contradict each other. There is representation in the sense of liberal democracy, where individuals are either elected or appointed to "speak for" discrete communities or interest groups. In many respects, this is how political organizations work, where individual members of the staff, board and committees presumably "speak for" certain communities. Whether in the context of electoral democracy or identity politics, this concept of "equal representation" is problematic in its assumptions that communities or interest groups can be encapsulated and contained, and that they can simply be re-presented as though they are fixed and unchanging.

And then there is representation in the sense of radical democracy, where representation of others is practically impossible. Every individual or collective must "speak for" itself, and conversely, no individual or collective may "speak for" any others. Any sort of leadership, in effect, is objectionable. This notion also has a place in the structure of

All too commonly, left culture or identity politics is defined by whatever the mainstream is not, and the grassroots by whatever is excluded from official recognition.

political organizations, usually when particular leaders are being challenged. However, this concept of "self-representation" is also problematic in its assumptions that individuals and collectives exist on a level social field and relate to each other on equal terms, that every person or group may articulate their own interests equally well but can never do so for any others, and that leadership itself plays no part in the constitution of political interests.

Now, we do not want to suggest that we may somehow right these wrongs of representation. For, as we understand it, representation must indeed always remain problematic. There can never be an easy resolution to the problem of representation. Let us put it this way—there is always a discontinuity between the represented and the representative. The project of cultural politics is *not* to bring these two into perfect alignment with each other, as if such a task is even possible, let alone desirable. Rather, it is only within the space of this discontinuity that the actual work of doing politics occurs. To assign the final word on any political issue to either the represented or the representative stops the political process. This discontinuity marks the productive nexus, the creative tension between the represented and the representative, where new ideas, styles and approaches to politics must be formulated because all of the established ones have already failed.

Let us be clearer on this point. The problem of leadership in cultural politics must be honestly addressed. The way community and not-for-profit organizations work is through strong leadership, and it does nobody any good to deny this. Of course, to think that the leadership of any organization knows in advance where the community is going or should move towards, politically speaking, is obviously an elitist or vanguard position. However, to think that community "knows" itself, "speaks for" itself, without ever being challenged or questioned, and that its leadership merely records or documents its political struggles, to think of politics in this way is romantic and naive. To think that any community must be preserved, in this sense, without changing or being transformed in the very process of representation is to deny the effects of leadership in the very constitution of that community. For leadership does not simply reflect community, but rather actively shapes not only its interests but also who that community is.

Community as such does not exist before leadership, so much as it is constituted through it.

The relationship of representation, then, transforms both the represented and the representative. This approach to the problem of representation need not result in a megalomaniacal approach to authority, but forces leaders of organizations to acknowledge their roles in the community and to take responsibility for their functions.

Let us spell out just one practical implication of this notion of representation for cultural politics. An immediate way to effectively address current problems of representation in cultural politics is to move away from the logic of representing communities or interest groups, and to move instead towards approaching political issues in their necessary complexity. That is, to approach any issue as a site of ongoing contestation, crosscut by many communities and interests at any particular historical moment, any particular cultural location. We are not arguing, then, that the personal is not political. Indeed, the personal is political, but not in the sense that they are equivalent, that there is a transparent relationship between them, as if a certain person will think a certain way because of their class, race, gender, sexuality, location, occupation, style of dressing, musical tastes or whatever else. Put simply, the concept of representation that we are suggesting means among other things, approaching cultural politics in terms of agendas rather than communities.

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As ideal as they may seem, the concepts of community, coalition, safe space and grassroots/mainstream are severely limited as foundational principles of political work whether organized around identity or the left. We have argued that the concepts of culture and representation, ironically the most worn of the terms which we have discussed, are far from exhausted and still allow for innovative approaches to doing politics. These concepts facilitate those projects that might be termed coalition or grassroots work without, however, getting into those intellectual traps which we have critiqued. It is precisely in their very slipperiness—what we have called the profanity of culture and the discontinuity of representation—that a renewal of the effort of cultural politics may occur. This renewed effort would shift the terms of cultural politics away from the strict orthodoxies of both identity and the left, without disclaiming these movements altogether.

Sean Lokaisingh-Meighoo is a Ph.D. student in Social and Political Thought at York University. He has been involved in various political and not-for-profit organizations around social justice, environmentalism and arts production. He is also a musician and writer based in Toronto.

Arif Noorani is the director of the first annual Toronto Human Rights Film and Video Festival. He is also a programmer with the Inside/Out Festival and Mayworks and the former coordinator of Desh Pardesh. He is a writer and cultural activist based in Toronto.

Bored Bedmates

Art & Criticism
Political vs. Critical

by Gary Kibbins

It is inevitable that satire aimed at critical art should have emerged. In a spoof of Jon Gnagy's "How-To-Draw" television program from the 1950s, two Montreal artists, Donald Goodes and A.M. Léger, made a how-to program entitled Each and Every One of You, designed to help the folks at home make "political" installation art. An affable host instructs the viewer step by step in how to critique Western imperialism through art by using items readily available around the house. Coffee beans are the preferred example in this case, linking as they do Western domestic comfort and Third World agrarian exploitation. A photo of some Third World people is also required, but for this it may be necessary to do some "research." To find such a photo, the host suggests National Geographic, a "treasured resource" for political artists, readily available in libraries and at garage sales.

Stills from *Each and Every One of You, "How to Make Contemporary Art," Episode One: The Political Accumulation Installation*, Donald Goodes & A.M. Léger, 1996, 32 min. Courtesy of V Tape, Toronto.

The political and the critical orbit tightly around each other like twin stars, and so it is surprising to see to what degree they can be mutually independent.

Find a photo, the host counsels, which "says exploitation." An outline of a large hand is drawn on the floor—the "invisible hand" now made visible, the hand of manual labour, but also of authority and control—which is filled with coffee beans. Finally, the photo is thoughtfully placed among the coffee beans in order to achieve maximum poignancy. Because of what he thought was the disturbing accuracy of *Each and Every One of You*, a video art distributor remarked jokingly that the tape should be suppressed, and that young, developing artists should be prohibited from viewing it.

Each and Every One of You could easily be dismissed as the harmless bit of cynicism that it is, were it not for the fact that it also provides a twisted reflection of the prevailing, troubled conditions of politicized art practices. The peculiar form that these troubled conditions presently embody can be articulated from two contradictory ends. The first, reflected in *Each and Every One of You*, is that such practices have become easy and predictable. The second, justifiably expressible in a tone of alarm, is that they are presently being squeezed out to the point of extinction. Both of these claims are true, but in order to see this peculiar state of affairs an important distinction needs to be made and maintained between "critical" art and "political" art. But first, some observations.

It is "critical" art that has become easy to make. So easy in fact, that artists have abandoned the practice in large numbers, as the challenges confronting them are seen less and less to reside there. Other themes and practices now seem more historically vibrant and worthy. The only form of discomfort caused by work that exhorts that capitalism is bad or that racism is wrong is its familiarity. The more subtle versions of such critiques are typically appreciated for their subtlety, not for their critique. And increasingly, into the growing vacuum of critical work flows popular and commercial culture, which continues to exert its considerable power as both a motive and a competitor.

At the same time that making critical work has become easier and easier, making "political" art has become harder and harder. This zero sum game has been playing itself out most visibly where the institutions of art are "higher" and more consolidated, or where they are disciplined, if not cowed, by the values of the art market and corporate sponsorship. Its effects can also be seen in community-based or artist-run centres, however, even though the prospects for political art continue to be brighter there. It is commonplace, for example, for an artwork to accept the constraining conditions of art's more conservative institutions while making politically radical statements. This now-familiar incongruity between what the artwork says and what it does reinforces the observation that, while such works may be undeniably critical, they are rarely political. One can see this problem codified in the various normative approaches taken by critics and historians. Hal Foster, for example, has emerged as the principle champion of an institutionally bound "critical" avant-garde, while David James, asserting the primacy of the mode of production as the "central interpretive category," emphasizes the importance and specificity of political strategies. In any case, frustration over the diminishing *political* potential in art's institutions surely contributes to the increasingly shrill nature of some critical art. It is as if to be genuinely or thoroughly or exceedingly critical will prove to be the stimulus necessary to resuscitate the political.

There are apt to be quarrels over the meaning of these two seminal terms, as the outcome can go to the heart of beliefs about the historical role of art, but I think the terms still convey the following general distinctions. The critical is largely propositional in nature. When the artist doesn't make her intentions known directly, the type and object of the critique is revealed through textual and contextual interpretation; the critical is largely a consequence of what the work *says*, not what it *does*. With few exceptions, the institutions of art receive these works with equanimity, regardless of the target of the critique. This is in part because, even if the critical artwork may talk about action, it does not by definition embody it. Until recently, the struggle to make certain forms of critique possible in artworks constituted such an embodied action, as it challenged and changed the institutions of art, but that is now very rare.

Political artworks have, I think, three general characteristics. The first is a strong normative streak; that is, they show prescriptive intentions and are full of "oughts." Second, they are concerned with the conditions of shared, public life, and are concerned with private experience only to the extent that the impact of that experience on public life is both expressible and expressed.[1] Finally, as an extension of this focus on public life, and because they have ambitions to affect material reality, political artworks, unlike their critical counterparts, embody action. Action is both the crucial category and the central problem of politicized art practices, and the more successfully self-reflexive works of the political avant-garde are those that have struggled to find its living form. Effecting momentary changes in the mental states of viewers is inadequate as a sufficient requirement for action. And there is more to the question of action than is expressed in the old chestnut that the left sits around theorizing hegemony while the right practices it, although that's probably part of it. "Postmodernity" has been a catastrophe for the agency of the political subject in general, so it's hardly surprising that it has been

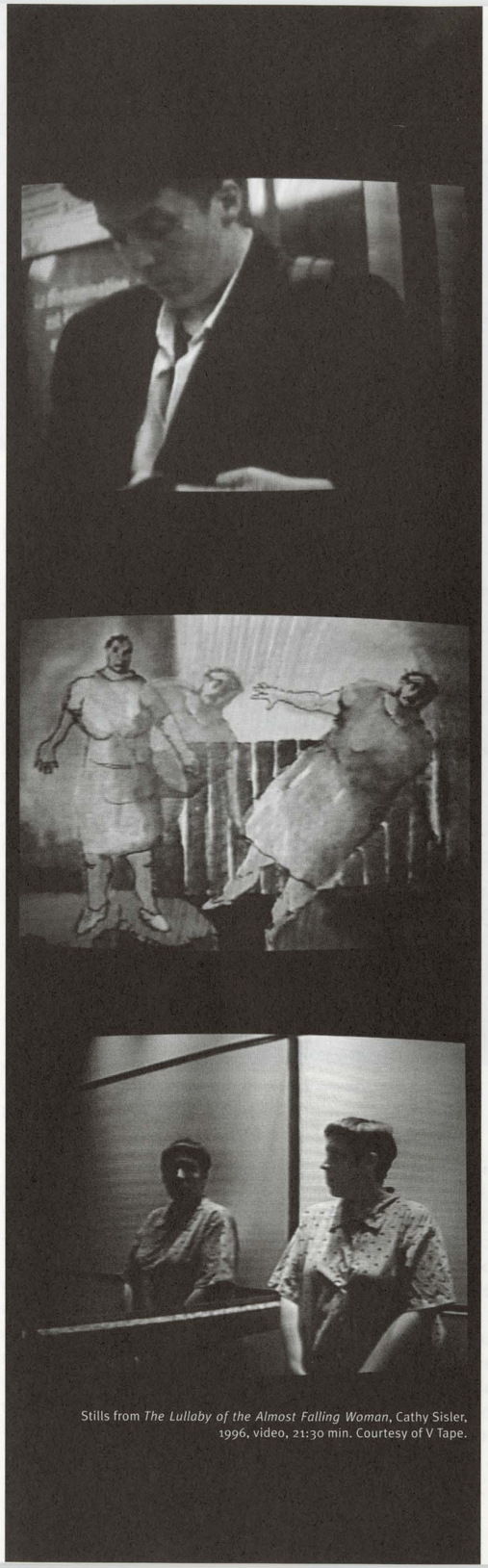
equally unkind to the agency of the political artist. Timothy Bewes points out that "the postmodern political is a form of *applied contemplation*,"[1] a phrase capturing the difficulty of separating what Hannah Arendt called the *vita activa* from the *vita contemplativa*. Like many others, political artists are struggling to construct a theory (perhaps even a plan) of action.

Political artworks take four general forms. The first two find alternatives to the depoliticizing effects of the institutions of art: when substantive linkages are forged with local actions outside art's institutions, as in the work of ACT UP artists; or with the building of alternative modes of production or formations (alternative institutions of art, as it were), as in the case of photographers Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge's work with and within the labour movement. The other two forms operate within the existing institutions of art, when the work's criticism is sufficiently penetrating to visibly shake an existing infrastructure. The cancellation of Hans Haacke's exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum in 1971 is a well-known example, suggesting that naming hitherto unnamed names can still occasionally raise criticism to a higher level. The second, admittedly less certain, form occurs when the work may not itself embody action, but nonetheless calls for it or represents it in a way that designates the political as the unfinished but *necessary* dimension of the artworks' project. Examples abound, and even include commercial movies.

Political Landscapes: Private Property, Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge, 1998, colour Cibachrome, 76x102 cm. Courtesy of the artists.

The political and the critical orbit tightly around each other like twin stars, and so it is surprising to see to what degree they can be mutually independent. The political can bypass critique, just as the critical can lack the political. The latter form is easily the most common, and also the most easily masked. To see it requires differentiating between the critical and the political despite their seeming synonymy, and despite the fact that "breaking down" or "blurring" the boundaries between categories has long been the order of the day. It's not conspiratorial to point out that the institutions of art, which are in no simple sense the cause of political art's current predicament, profit from blurring the boundaries between the critical and the political; nor is it an exaggeration to point out that artists lose.

Defending the legitimacy of the political in art production can take a strong or a weak form. The strong form argues that the political is the natural or proper condition of *all* artworks. The weak form perceives a healthy range of art practices, which can, when the conditions of the work and its context demand, realize a political dimension. In the



Stills from *The Lullaby of the Almost Falling Woman*, Cathy Sisler, 1996, video, 21:30 min. Courtesy of V Tape.

weak version, the significance of political works extends beyond their individual achievements. The political dimension, realized by *some* works, anchors the critical in *all* artworks; it gives them ballast. The political resonates across the wide spectrum of works as an active potential. The political is the oxygen of critique. The moment that critique is understood, consciously or not, to be incapable of achieving the political, it becomes a solely and cynically contemplative affair de-linked from action. That is when repressive tolerance achieves its most complete victory.

Does it really matter? The general withering away of the political is a process by no means unique to the art world. Hannah Arendt, who decried its destruction most passionately, also defended with equal passion the sanctity of the domain of the non-political.[2] The respective defense of the political and non-political domains against encroachment by the other, she argued, was an essential form of defense against a creeping massification of society with decidedly fascist consequences. Is the Arendtian "refuge" of the non-political the proper place of art? Perhaps the long process of self-realization in art has at last arrived at a resolution of this, art's "political" problem. I suspect there would be no great shortage of people eager to see this interpretation succeed. It would be at the very least convenient to conclude that the artworld had arrived at its present non-political status honestly, although even the most fleeting acquaintance with artworld norms and practices would show that conclusion naive.

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I will admit to finding the two extremes—that *all* artworks *should* be political, or, the prevailing scenario, marginalizing the political to the vanishing point—equally nightmarish. The political and the non-political simply do different things, and are frequently mutually supportive. But feeling quite unable to resolve this debate, I'll proceed by considering three artworks which stage, in different ways, the conflicts and anxieties of the critical–political distinction, armed with the optimistic belief that artists are in the slow and difficult process of rediscovering, if not reinventing, the political in their practice. Two such are video works made by Montreal artist Cathy Sisler, *The Lullaby of the Almost Falling Woman* (1996) and *Aberrant Public Speaking* (1994).

The protagonist in Cathy Sisler's video *The Lullaby of the Almost Falling Woman* is unemployed. More accurately, she has the unpaid job of looking for a job, an experience almost universally deplored. The groveling mixed with occasional humiliation so often a part of that experience is articulated with extraordinary poignancy. She constantly stumbles and falls, in job interviews, in the metro, in the street, and her falling reveals more than mere physical clumsiness. Psychological explanations are strongly prompted by the tape: falling is an outward expression of insecurity, of feeling uncomfortable in one's body. Reinforced by the expressionist drawings and the often introspective tone of the voiceover text, this is the manifest, and easily the most effortless, reading. It is also the most unfortunate, for it takes one no further than the perceived personal failings of the falling woman. According to this response, the work's considerable poetic energies are deployed to make the unremarkable point that she is a falling woman because she has a personal tendency to fall.

The psychological reading is also advanced by the link between falling and silence. On two solipsistic occasions she stares at her reflection on a blank computer screen, her hands suspended above the keyboard as she mimics the act of typing. The sense of isolation throughout the tape is extreme. In a kind of institutionally controlled fall, she rides down an elevator with another woman just emerging from a job interview. This other woman is "angry, worried, desperate." Despite their common experiences, they ignore each other, and separate on the street. During a fall in the metro, the almost-falling woman bites her tongue, which bleeds profusely. A concerned stranger asks if she is all right, but the almost falling woman has a mouth full of blood, and cannot respond to this anonymous act of kindness with anything more than a nod. They too turn away from each other. This isolation is unrelieved, but we understand its importance as something like a mode of Being when she refers to her own blood as "she," and to herself and her blood together as "we."

From a political point of view, however, there is no greater certainty of failure than isolation. Perhaps because "solidarity" is so utterly absent in this work, to see it from that point of view at all is fundamentally wrong-headed. The only solidarity on display is that of the plastic, clone-like paratroopers, who are "intentional fallers," but "not intentional like a strong or weak will." This peculiar statement becomes clearer when the voiceover reveals that the almost-falling woman's "falling intention is starting to show." The almost falling woman *wants* to fall, and that is the primary insight into the nature of her resistance. She falls to avoid unfreedom, even if in doing so she falls into an unfreedom of another sort. The paratroopers' fall may be graceful and intentional, but the intention is not theirs. They're just following orders. The almost-falling woman intends to fall, for to stand up and speak clearly, to answer the inane questions posed by the heads of personnel, is to accept the unacceptable system that they represent. She will not do that, so she falls intentionally, and that intention, at least, is her own.

Intention here is something like will, which, as she observes, is absent in the paratroopers in any form. The almost-falling woman can see the type of will available to the successful job applicant on a sign, as she leaves another unsuccessful job interview. The sign reads: "We encourage the employees to think of themselves as free individuals." She knows, though, that such employees are the paratroopers of the working world. Her refusal to type is a refusal to fulfill the conditions necessary to get a job. She applies for jobs, but then arranges to not get them, a self-sabotaging that also "sabotages her embarrassment." Still, she must apply for jobs, for, like everyone else, she needs one, and this need, somewhat tragically and somewhat humorously, turns her resistance into a form of victimization.

Now, as a political strategy, the quiescent and solitary form of resistance embodied by the almost-falling woman is flawed, to say the least. If this serves as "oppositional," the targets of such opposition can surely rest safe in their beds. However beautifully expressive the video work may be, it would undoubtedly earn low marks from most labour activists. The best it could be expected to get from ideology critique might be a treatment similar to that which Marx gave religion: it is illusion. Her form of resistance is, politically, an illusion, for it will not materially change her circumstances. Yet it contains an important element of truth, which is its expressive protest against unacceptable conditions of living and working. One can't really argue against these criticisms, for socially and economically, the almost-falling woman will not materially better her own lot, nor that of others. It lacks that epiphanous, Hallmark-card ending according to which she realizes that only through solidarity, by organizing a militant union of the unemployed, can she hope to succeed. On the contrary, the last, very lengthy shot of the tape shows the almost-falling woman standing precariously in front of a collapsing building, in silence. Because in this tape, psychological reality always precedes social and historical reality, the primary job of the collapsing building is to refer metaphorically to her, and only secondarily to the de-industrialization of the island of Montreal where the video was shot.

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The job of politicized art criticism is to evaluate the presence and success of political criteria in artworks. Victor Burgin once defended his work from such critics to his left by saying that it was unreasonable to fault him for not having achieved what he never attempted to achieve in the first place. And while this may cede too much authority to the artist's intention, it does capture some of the indignation experienced when the mode of criticism is mismatched with the artwork, and an unfavourable evaluation results from irrelevant questions. An analysis of *The Almost Falling Woman* which would judge its value as a representation of resistance by extracting the political elements from the work and disregarding the rest, would constitute such a mismatch, for the rest of the tape is a beautifully difficult handling of a common experience, and is successful according to other, non-political criteria. What a properly political analysis reveals about *The Almost Falling Woman*, while incomplete, is nonetheless legitimate. Any approach that excludes that political or strategic analysis will be equally partial. Thus we have a familiar enough impasse: the political analysis of the critic/viewer is reductive if not procrustean, and doesn't respect the richness of the artwork. Neglecting the political analysis on the other hand passes over in silence one of its fundamental and inescapable components. The obvious

response to this impasse—to integrate political and other forms of art criticism—is also an unachievable aim, for political analysis remains stubbornly incommensurate with non-political approaches. They simply ask different questions, and in doing so are responsible to different criteria. When political and non-political approaches occur in the same analysis, they are juxtaposed, not integrated. At the end of the day, one cannot avoid the fact that what defines the reception process as political is that properly political questions are asked.

It is tempting to see the concept of politics as one among many in a toolbox of options. But while most forms of art criticism prudently stop after carrying out descriptive or interpretive roles, political art criticism, like political artworks themselves, is unavoidably normative, making it something of a special case. Failing to distinguish the political from the non-political confuses the role of normative judgments. The legitimate and in fact necessary role that normative analysis plays can exceed its jurisdiction, which is in the realm of the political proper, and find itself in the realm of poetics where it has no business. We see the results of this confusion when the process of art criticism assumes the outrageous power to "paraphrase" artworks and to say how they "ought" to have been.

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An earlier work by Sisler from 1994, *Aberrant Public Speaking*, features the "spinning woman" and her humorously painful efforts to find a place in the public domain from which she can speak. The long silence of the almost-falling woman as she stands awkwardly in front of dilapidated buildings parallels the spinning woman's barely audible efforts to communicate. She stands beside a freeway, reading excerpts from a book entitled *Speech: Its Techniques and Disciplines in a Free Society*, while cars zoom noisily by in brutish disregard. The political, public sphere which the almost-falling woman refuses to enter is here revealed not in its idealized form, but in something like its presently existing, debased form. The words "sell yourself" appear occasionally on screen, reminding us that to be successful in this public sphere is to adapt oneself and one's principles to a corrupt and brazenly self-serving environment. It would be futile to reproach the spinning woman for choosing poor "public sphere" locations in which to manifest herself, for success is not the goal of her exercise. Her speech is not her own, although one senses that this is not because she has nothing to say, but because she refuses to squander her own thoughts in so base an environment. The self-sabotaging defiance of the almost-falling woman is repeated here in the context of speech; she vandalizes her own efforts, and mocks her own ambitions.

The awkwardness of the almost-falling woman and the spinning woman is both essential to, and at the same time masks, the almost monumental integrity of self that they paradoxically embody. But theirs are not political actions. For Arendt, in order to be political, the concern must be not for the self, but for "the world." Thus matters of conscience are not political in nature, even if they motivate actions we would call political, for conscience is a personal concern whose primary interest is the integrity of the self. Both conscience and the privatized form of resistance practiced by Sisler's characters are, to borrow Arendt's terminology, a matter of "strength," for they are a product of the individual, while "power" is a product of a plurality. "Power," in Arendt's terms, creates the *polis*, the public realm of action and speech. Hers is an idealized vision of participatory democracy, and she deplores the subjectivism of modernity, which creates only mass society and totalitarianism. The public sphere is the "space of appearances," where identity is produced through action, conferring on the public sphere an aleatory nature quite at odds with the largely concocted image of political groups struggling through tedious meetings in order to reach a consensus that pleases no one. In a fundamental sense, it concerns freedom, to employ a concept not much used anymore.

In both of Sisler's tapes, the nature of the protagonist's resistance to unacceptable conditions is virtually guaranteed to not change those conditions, and she resists the political as fervently as she resists the unacceptable conditions which only the political could conceivably change. The peculiar provocation of Sisler's works is to *negate* the political, and it is surely not accidental that her negation leaves the strong outline of the thing negated.

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Sisler's refusal to represent a contribution to the political is her most useful political contribution, although this potential needs to be seized and elaborated in the reception process. Mutually reinforcing programming is one way to achieve this. I like to imagine these two videos shown alongside a fine, now rarely seen film documentary by Sophie Bissonnette from 1985 called *What Number?* Shot in Montreal in 1983–84 and circulated largely in union settings, the film is constructed largely of interviews with women adversely affected by new computer technologies. The women interviewed are keenly aware of the issues, and confident of their analysis. They consistently forefront the collective nature of the problems facing them, and most importantly, are eager for political action. They are also unionized, and thus are afforded a degree of protection from militant action not enjoyed by non-unionized workers. In the credits, Bissonette thanks the non-union workers, who "thought it wiser not to appear." One woman remarks sarcastically: "I look at my machine and think it's better treated than I am." Another claims that her husband liked it better when she was on strike, because it was only then, away from work, when she stopped yelling at their daughter. It is hard to imagine the stress associated with "becoming a button-pusher" being expressed with more sobering clarity. Next comes a remarkably inclusive insight into the power relations that prevail between capital and worker, packed efficiently into a single sentence: "They're the ones

Promotional poster for "*Quel Numero What Number?*" or *The Electronic Sweatshop*, dir. Sophie Bissonnette, 1985, 16mm, 81 min.
Distributed by Cinéma Libre, Montreal. Courtesy of the Film Reference Library, Toronto.

Still from *"Quel Numero What Number"* or *The Electronic Sweatshop*, dir. Sophie Bissonnette, 1985, 16mm, 81 min. Distributed by Cinéma Libre, Montreal. Courtesy of the Film Reference Library, Toronto.

who put up money for the machines, now we're the ones who better produce." But perhaps the most striking allegory in this arena of worker–management conflict occurs when a secretary describes the introduction of new computers to her work area. Charged with the responsibility of setting up the new system, she takes the reasonable step of convening meetings with her co-workers in order to include those people in the planning process who would be most affected by the changes. The boss, realizing that the secretaries understand the system with more depth than he does himself, reverses most of the decisions in order to ensure control remains in his own hands, with no regard for its effect on his employees.

The film is remarkable largely because the women interviewed are remarkably astute about their situation. (Their observations match almost point for point the arguments made by David Noble, a labour and technology historian, in his seminal essays written during the same period.[3]) Through the agency of the film and filmmaker, the women articulate the two fundamental criteria of the political: the centrality of material, social change, and the creation and transformation of a public sphere through speech and action. This is the backdrop, if not the immediate setting, of the almost falling woman's anxiety.

Thus what makes *What Number?* such a successful film—its effortless linking of a more-or-less descriptive experience of the workplace to militant ideas like worker control—*contradicts* nicely the elements that make Sisler's works such successful videos—the expressive experience of non-political defiance in the face of unacceptable life-conditions. The strategic arrangement of such contradictions helps move the political beyond the realm of specific content largely controlled by self-appointed "political" people and toward the dialogical ideal envisioned by Arendt. It is true that Arendt would not have approved of the instrumentality of social change conceived as the goal of the political. The public sphere, she asserted, must continually be brought into existence without preconditions of any kind. Her faith lay in the process of its becoming: only good could possibly come of it. Those of us inclined to move forward in a more cautious if not pedestrian manner may look wonderingly on such ideals, but in the end slip back to the political's more immediate concerns, pressing as they are.

Notes

1. Timothy Bewes, *Cynicism and Postmodernism*, (London: Verso, 1997) p. 209.

2. See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958) pp. 22-74.

3. See David Noble, *Progress Without People: In Defense of Luddism*, (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Publishing, 1993).

Gary Kibbins is a film and video artist presently dividing his time between Kingston and Los Angeles. His latest work is The Alien Seaman.

JAMES WILLIAMS

shift, change 1988–1998

CURATED BY BRYCE KANBARA

THE ART GALLERY OF HAMILTON, HAMILTON, ONTARIO, AUGUST 6, 1998–JANUARY 3, 1999

REVIEW BY SHERRI TELENKO

Social documentary work is frequently criticized for one thing: detachment. Photographers often enter situations with the agenda of the observer, the visible outsider. Many, like American Mary Ellen Mark, have answered this charge with a mandate to interact with the subjects and become a part of their world over time, earning trust and granting dignity.

Yet few can claim to record their chosen subjects with the same insider view and passionate conviction as photographer and former steelworker James Williams. For fourteen years, Williams worked in Hamilton, home of Ontario's steel industry, as his father did forty years before him. After leaving the industry to attend the Ontario College of Art and then Buffalo's State University of New York, Williams made it his life's work to document the labourers within the factories. His intent is to bring dignity to the working class in a society that, as he claims, "treats heavy industry and hard labour as an embarrassment."

Williams' ongoing *Steeltown* series is a noble pursuit driven by a straightforward, sincere mandate: to put a face on an industry and an identity to those most effected by corporate decisions, like plant closures. It has culminated in "shift, change 1988–1998," a ten-year retrospective of Williams' work.

Large, black and white portraits of steel workers taken on site dominate Williams' earlier work. *Steeltown, Mural #8* (1995) can be considered a document of both workplace and residence. Specifically, images of rows of generic, square homes built in the '40s and '50s to house the abundance of workers and their families are pieced together to create an aerial view of Hamilton. Juxtaposed over this collage are six 8" x 10" black and white photographs of the men who inhabit these workplaces and houses. Later, inside the gallery, we encounter these individuals depicted in pairs or alone, posing in their workplace setting.

In one particularly engaging documentary portrait, *Tony and Raphael, Lockport, NY* (1992), two men stand side by side. One man, young, large and black, leans casually against a metal drum and smiles for the camera. The other man is smaller, older, white and caked with soot. He is wearing goggles and gloves and has removed his facial mask (still in his hands) just long enough for the photograph to be taken. Captured here is literally a brief moment of repose; work begins again moments after the shutter is snapped.

Williams' murals are not one seamless image, but composed of a grid of individual images. Intended to be a tribute to the worker in the photograph, they are also a statement about the fragmented, or shaky, foundation on which their communities and livelihoods rest during a time defined by plant closures and downsizing. The size of the murals also scream one clear message:

Völklinger Hütte #3, Völklingen, Germany, James Williams, ink jet print on canvas, 76 x 102 cm, 1997.

Below: *HYLSA #3, Monterrey, Mexico*, James Williams, ink jet print on canvas, 76x102 cm, 1997.

the contributions of these individuals cannot go unnoticed, or unrecorded.

By validating the social contributions of the steelworker in a gallery setting, Williams has created a window into a world many, particularly those associated with art galleries, are separate from. But something else also happens, something perhaps more interesting and unconscious. Considering the sense of validation that results when the subjects of Williams' murals (and those like them) view his finished work, Williams' *Steeltown* series also indirectly validates "Art" and the importance of art galleries to all members of the community.

Williams' latest work, exhibited for the first time in this retrospective, is similar in message and intent to his earlier pieces, but has evolved both conceptually and technologically. In smaller, ink jet on canvas prints, Williams utilizes digital photography to superimpose colour photographs of people who work in satellite steel industries (like trucking and transportation) against monotone images of the steel plants which fuel the subjects' livelihoods. In *Völklinger Hütte #3, Völklingen, Germany* (1997), two young men in red overalls stand smiling as though in a family portrait. Behind them looms the gray, monotone plant on which their business is dependent. Children are part of the equation too: In *Hylsa #3, Monterrey, Mexico* (1997), a young Mexican boy astride a bicycle (in colour) leaps from the canvas. Again, behind him is the gray, monotone interior of a steel plant. This time though, its modern, highly mechanized, safer work environment is almost employee-free.

Williams' later work is no longer just about the steelworker; it is about community and the mechanization and commercial dependence of a specific fluctuating industry. Nor is it about North America only; the digital work is taken in both Mexico and Germany, underlining the shift towards a more global economy where economic change comes at a real—and in this case identified and documented—cost.

Sherri Telenko is the Arts Editor at id Magazine, *an urban weekly based in Guelph, Ontario. She is also a regular freelance writer for several national and regional arts and entertainment publications.*

THE SENSE IN "YAWNING"

Yawning

CHARLIE CITRON, DAVID MILLER, MILOŠ VOJTĚCHOVSKÝ, MARTIN ZET
ORGANIZED BY HERMIT FOUNDATION, CZECH REPUBLIC
AT HOME GALLERY, ŠAMORÍN, SLOVAKIA

REVIEW BY JO WILLIAMS

Mournful and curious twists of history have lead to the presentation of contemporary art in former synagogues in central Europe. In use since the time when their congregations were destroyed, now entangled in legalities of ownership and ethical questions, these ruined synagogues reverberate with the tension of contested space. Hollowed and worn, they speak more powerfully than most memorials of the still recent tragedy of the Holocaust. The former Šamorín synagogue in Slovakia was the center of a Jewish community of 700, reduced by murder to thirty-five; now it is the site of the At Home Gallery. More than other abandoned and reclaimed spaces, it is not emptied of its past, of the catastrophe of its abandonment—no matter how beautiful, even joyful, the interior space now appears. In a town that has undergone five shifts of dominion in this century, the former Šamorín synagogue, now exhibition and performance space, is a deeply unsettled site. According to Jewish law, it is still holy and its secular use—whether as a warehouse during the communist regime or as the gallery today—is a desecration. For some, the contemporary use of the synagogue is not blasphemous enough and vandalism is routine.

Negotiating through the layers of history, meaning, theology and politics is a formidable challenge to anyone considering the use of such sites. Generally, these issues and their elective meanings are suppressed, as happened when a former mikveh (ritual bathhouse) was appropriated for a garage (in Šamorín) and a former synagogue was leased as a department store (in Velké Meziříčí, Czech Republic). The law given to Moses dictates that desolate synagogues should remain so; weeds should be left to grow rampant within them. But the law does not account for no people being left to grieve the decay. The meaning of a place deemed to retain holiness in its very bricks falls beyond what could once be fathomed.

Visual art and memorials dedicated to the memory of the Holocaust too often, like uninteresting art of any subject, adhere too closely to the expected. Past exhibitions of installation art at At Home Gallery included train tracks built up to the building's door and a room filled with empty suitcases. Once expressive, suitcases, trains and barbed wire are now among the rote visual vocabulary of the Holocaust. Artwork relying on convention and easy emotion touches only that which its audience is prepared to feel. Thought or perplexity or fear—irritations that extend the significance of a work beyond the gallery walls and push understanding past a certain place, country, or people—are rarely engaged. In the creative treatment of any subject, the challenge is to elicit experience that remains vital over time and place. When the subject is human brutality that transgresses what was thought imaginable and now ranks as possible, the insult made by mediocre art is all the more disheartening.

Rusting and immovable, the intentional remnants from a 1998 exhibition at At Home Gallery have quietly become a permanent and pungent memorial. Staining and aging with the Šamorín synagogue, David Miller's permanent outdoor cast iron objects remind us, as did the exhibition's temporary works, of the sense installation art can still make. There is whimsy in the work, a suggestion of irreverence, as in the exhibition title "Yawning." To yawn is also a reaction to insufficiency, an attempt to revive the body and mind with an exaggerated and sustained breath in and out. This deceptively light approach to a subject of such weight deserves a revisit.

Within the synagogue/gallery's airy main room, Martin Zet and Miloš Vojtěchovský toyed with motion and meaning in a collaborative installation of object and sound. From where a light fixture once illuminated the sanctuary, the artists hung a functional fabricated fan extending too low and delicately from the frescoed ceiling. Placed just steps within the entrance and positioned to graze a tall person's skull, the work was unequivocally strange and threatening. The object winked at transcendence with its reverse vents that swept air upward as it slowly turned, but more disturbingly resembled an instrument of execution. Most vexing and jarring, as a cross spinning on a swastika-shaped axis, the fan incited anger or at least agitated bewilderment. Waves of recorded sounds of beating feathers filled the gallery and hinted at the otherworldly, those of human and animal voices of the earthly. These were interspersed at unnatural intervals with found sounds of machinery in motion–a

očist a i ec, David Miller, installation detail, cast iron objects, various sizes. Photo: Martin Zet.

freight elevator, airplane, shotgun–disquieting passages that perturb more than uplift. The profane and inflammatory elements of Zet's and Vojtěchovský's installation electrified the sanitized gallery space, defying an easy veneration of art, much less of the former synagogue and the history it bears. It set in motion a sense of the easy violence done to meaning, whether by disregard, ignorance or the careless hurling of signifiers.

In the At Home Gallery's foyer, Charlie Citron's photographs hung in continuous strips. His work obscures images of abandoned, but not violated, sacral objects from the Czech Republic's Plzen synagogue before its recent reconstruction. The objects' transformation in a creative process of mutation (photographs of photographs blurred in boiling wax) sets up a metaphysical distance, the sense that one cannot get at them. This could be taken as history. Not particular to the Šamorín synagogue or At Home Gallery, the photographs addressed the precariousness of the neglected potency of symbols.

If Zet and Vojtěchovský posited an entry warning betraying a hesitation to penetrate the space, Miller infiltrated the site from within and around, establishing a permanent presence. His life-size, rusted iron casts are of common, handled objects—bottles, buns, tools, a book—made weighty and useless. Their meaning is found in their deliberate placement. Stout, crooked, tall, or prostrate, ten rough casts of bottles of cleansing agents arranged as if casually convening near the former Torah ark have the presence of characters even without their title "Minyan" (prayer quorum). Among the permanent works, rusted cast tools—a rake, mallet, shovel, screwdriver—lean or rest in the building's landing, forever waiting not to be used. Others—an axe, scythe, drill—are fixed upon the worn facade's raw spots. Two hefty detergent bottles stand constant vigil on a side set of stairs. As if forgotten, a cast leather-bound book lies upon the edge of the building's fence, its rust staining the concrete. Upon the disused gatepost, cast bottles of beer, slivovice and whiskey form a composition that reflects the building they are set before. Playful but knowing, these permanent works on the periphery reinforce the presence of the former synagogue/gallery to its very borders within a town and time that are baffled by its existence. Miller's cast iron objects somehow protect the place they inhabit. They stand as unflappable sentinels for contemporary expression, and as new relics that attempt to approach and care for (cleanse, repair, preserve) the absent community and belief that this site once sheltered.

These works animated meaning, though they could easily have escaped notice within the imposing emptiness and absence that the synagogue/gallery possesses. The site was treated not as a neutral gallery, but as a locus of history and memory, of human endeavour, creation, folly and ruin. Miller's work is now part of its story. He, like the other artists, suspended unthinking reverence, risked offence and misperception, to recover a meaning and experience already present.

Jo Williams has been living in the Czech Republic since 1993, working for museums and translating. She is currently Program Director of the Center for Metamedia-Plasy, an art residency and project centre in the Czech countryside.

POP OFF

the regular 8 faction

FILMS BY JOYCE WIELAND, ROBERT COWAN, KEITH LOCK (LOCK KEI KONG), DAVID ANDERSON, LINDA FEESEY, MARNIE PARREL, JOHN KNELLER AND D.B. MALTBY

CURATED BY MILADA KOVÁČOVÁ, WITH CATALOGUE ESSAYS BY JOHN PORTER AND LISA STEELE
YYZ ARTISTS' OUTLET, TORONTO, JUNE 3–JULY 25, 1998

REVIEW BY JOHN MCCULLOUGH

Histories of technology have the potential to fascinate. Chronicles of modifications made to machines and tools over time have a sense of linearity and causality which is both educational and pleasurable in its predictability. These narratives provide the possibility of understanding how some things in the world came to be and how those things might change over time. This explains one of the persistent questions in modernity, asked by young and old alike: "What will things be like in the future?" In an epoch defined largely by its tools and its progress as characterized by those tools it makes sense that we would all think about future technologies. Fantasy images of the future are already littered with stereotypical iconography including robots and cyborgs, cars and kitchens, virtual reality and new media, health and law enforcement facilities, and warfare and weaponry—all imagined in a seemingly common-sensical glimpse into the future. Which is just to say that we imagine future technology as an extension of what we know about past technology. Crucially it is our ability to explain change that allows us to imagine a future. And this is one reason that histories of tools and machines are compelling.

While the history of a technology's development is possible and enjoyable, the history of the effects of any technology seems impossible and frustrating. The role that any single technology plays in a social formation is difficult to discern as the variety of its effects are usually highly-complex and, in some instances, they appear to be contradictory. It is difficult enough determining which technology should be seen as normative or dominant. For instance, although filmed entertainment is seen to be dominated by 70mm or 35mm technology, one could also argue, given the nature of Hollywood entertainment and its dependence upon selling to ancillary markets, that it is video technology that has the most effect within technologies of filmed entertainment. Similarly, for a children's movie distributed on film it may be that the computer that animated the characters is really the dominant tool. Certainly the toys that are part of the movie franchise are equally important. In the case of an action blockbuster shot on big-gauge film, is the theme park (which is building a ride based on the movie) the dominant technology and the movie just the advertisement for it? Clearly it is easier to predict the look of a technology than it is to predict its use (i.e. its existence, role and effects). Who would have guessed, for instance, that regular and Super 8 film technology would be a going concern in the twilight of the twentieth century? After video, after IMAX, after digital imaging computers, after holograms why would a mechanical, analogic amateur technology still warrant society's attention?

In the last two years several Toronto shows have featured small-gauge film work. The "3 Minute Rock Star" show curated by Jane Farrow and Allyson Mitchell; the Cinematheque's screening of Robert Kennedy's work; Melinda Stone's visit with the "Super Super 8 Festival" show; John Porter's "Open Screenings and All-request Show"; and the Splice This! festival all attest to the intensity of small-gauge film culture in the area. YYZ's "POP OFF" show, curated by Milada Kováčová, is related to this culture but is unique amongst these other shows for two significant reasons. One is that this is an exclusively regular 8 show and, second, this is an historical retrospective spanning thirty years of film art from the Toronto area.

The show is also notable as it gives evidence of a particular characteristic of lo-tech art that can be thematically linked to the agitation between modern and post-modern aesthetics. That is, as diverse as the art is there is a tone to all of it, from Joyce Wieland to Linda Feesey and from Keith Lock to John Kneller, which imparts a theme of concern for the production of art as process and this resonates as lingering modernism. Paradigmatic of this tendency is David Anderson's *Teperman* which is a straightforward documention of the fence around the Eaton's Centre construction site in 1974 in which the process of banal recording of the property border takes over as the ultimate purpose of the film. On opening night Anderson augmented the characteristics of the film's process by "performing" the film. As he moved the projector beam around the room in conformity with the original camera movements the film (as an entity) became quite indistinct from the gallery walls and this not only effected the reception of the film but it also seemed to animate the images pulled out of time.

Teperman, David Anderson, 1974, regular 8mm, colour, silent, 7:00 min.
Photo: Milada Kováčová.

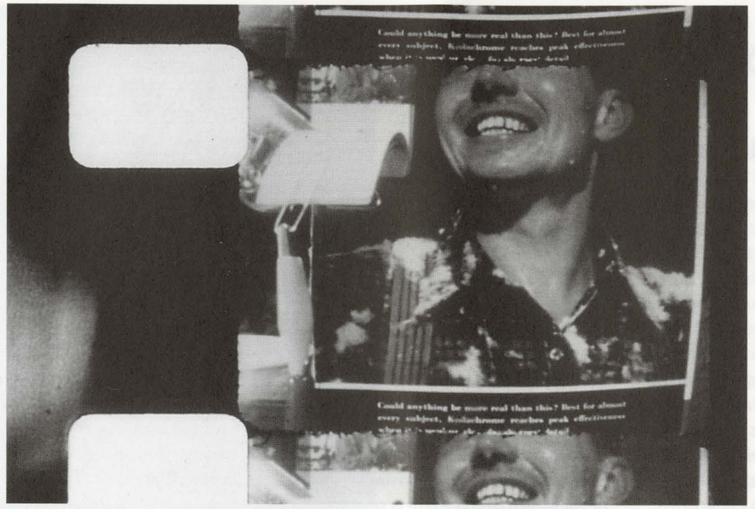
In featuring this type of minimalist conceptual art "POP OFF" sets itself apart from an art film culture that often reeks for being so cutting-edge. Specifically, the show seems poised to recover what energy may remain from the last flourish of cultural modernism—the industrial culture movement of the 1980s. That movement argued that consumer culture used its technologies in haplessly unimaginative and aggressive ways to the detriment of all. Artists like Throbbing Gristle, Survival Research Laboratories and Boyd Rice antagonistically and specifically repudiated the bureaucratized and uninspired exploitation of modern resources. It was a culture spun from punk fabric and is connected to Dadaism and Surrealism (cf. Greil Marcus' *Lipstick Traces*). Crucial to this art practice is the perception of the act of cultural production as a site of performance (improv or performance art) or a site of labour (do-it-yourself, if possible), and in this sense an art form that is defined more by process than product.

As inheritor of that creative perspective "POP OFF" effectively recalls that all technology depends upon creative labour and so takes some of its direction from the romantic and nostalgic impulses of artisanal mythology. Lisa Steele's "meditation" in the show catalogue is representative of this approach and in foregrounding the artisanal tradition the show appears distinct from both mainstream film and other contemporary time-based arts. Which is to say that the films in the show look like nothing else that is generally seen in the multiplex or the gallery. These films are all stylized and hand-made reflections on time and place (at home, in the city, watching TV), but they are modest, rough-hewn and sometimes tedious. In this sense they recall '60s experimental films and in particular the mythopoeic and structural styles discerned by P. Adam Sitney in his book *Visionary Film*.

According to Sitney mythopoeic films usually feature a quest structure within which a central character, often the filmmaker, proceeds toward an abstract and transcendent resolution. The treatment of the imagery ranges from the minimally altered but highly-staged examples of Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* or Kenneth Anger's *Fireworks* all the way to a work like Stan Brakhage's *Dog Star Man*, which is marginally concerned with staging but extensively organized around the quality of the image (i.e. colour, tone, movement in frame). Structural film, on the other hand, is principally a minimalist style of filmmaking and has its high-water marks in the work of Michael Snow, Ernie Gehr, Andy Warhol and Paul Sharits.

In "POP OFF," the films by Joyce Wieland, Bob Cowan and Keith Lock, all made in the '60s, are the obvious connection to the mythopoeic and structural forms. But even recent work in the show gives evidence of these stylistic traits. D.B. Maltby's *Collateral Damage* is a considered response to the Gulf War that utilizes a reflective pace and richly-layered images to re-view a war that was apprehended through the lens of the TV screen. In Maltby's film the connection between the mediated distance offered by new technologies and the proliferation of imagery (effected both by TV and multiple-exposed regular 8), serves to focus critical attention on the aesthetics of war.

On the structural end of the show, Marnie Parrell's *Hitler and Me* (1990) is an effective if excruciating structural film that loops a musique concrète piece (including a sample of Dusty Springfield's "Son of a Preacher Man") under a full-colour still image of a healthy Aryan male. The film is pixillated but almost nothing changes from shot-to-shot. The film's central premise of contrasting concepts of apparent change (and the fluidity of surfaces) with the concept of substantial change is not only a good description of the theme of structural film but also describes one of the themes of the totalitarian state. (It also explains why many



Hitler and Me, Marnie Parrell, 1990, regular 8mm, colour, silent, 3:30 min.
Photo: Milada Kováčová.

people think that structural film is the tool of the totalitarian state.)

It is Linda Feesey's *Fuckhead Film Cycle 1*, though, which makes explicit the various strands of artistic tradition which organize the logic of "POP OFF." In its multiply-exposed and titillating imagery it is reminiscent of the stylistic tradition which includes the work of Deren, Anger, James Broughton and early Brakhage. Its aggressive anti-aesthetic, though, makes it clear that the film is a product of post-punk aesthetics and this is made explicit by the soundtrack which includes sound from Psychic TV. Additionally, the close relationship between this film and music video form iterates two themes crucial to the show: first, the practicality and principled intimacy of do-it-yourself production (i.e. make your own music video) and, second, the ubiquitous presence of specific cultural forms as they are realized at various levels of generalized cultural production (i.e. avant-garde art now emulates music videos).

"POP OFF" seems to suggest that the detritus of military and consumer culture (i.e. amateur cameras) has the destiny of not just garbage but of being potentially transformed into productive force. Sometimes, as in the performances in *Larry's Recent Behaviour*, the force of creative energy is tangible as laughter. In Feesey's work it is felt as anxiety. Alternatively, the visual algebra that organizes John Kneller's *Separation Anxiety* is clearly indicative of a dedicated and precise craft (something that Kneller has consistently referred to as "controlled experiment"). In this piece, Kneller rigorously manipulates exposure, matte placement and the conceptual development of a formalist exercise worthy of the name. Such fascination with skill and DIY ethics define "POP OFF"'s attitude and approach. While the show's content obviously articulates a distinction between lo-tech and hi-tech art, there is a sense that difference is intimately related to other general distinctions such as the difference between being a producer or a consumer or the difference between seeing the world as modern or postmodern.

The temptation to theorize social meaning around technology is always pressing. But if one assumes that production patterns determine a social formation this is not the same as assuming that technologies determine social formations. Technological determinism (i.e. McLuhan's principle that "the medium is the message") cannot account for the variety of social relations which influence a social formation. To focus solely on tools is to lose sight of what humans do with their technology. This position would have to assume that *Larry's Recent Behaviour*, a performance of *Teperman*, *Separation Anxiety* and *Fuckhead Film Cycle 1*, to the extent that their technological form has been superseded, are without social value and social meaning. John Porter's "History of 8mm Film in Toronto," included in the show catalogue, puts the lie to such a reductionist idea. The networks which he traces over forty years suggest an immensely convoluted social stratum that includes art and educational institutions, personalities, stylistic trends, immigration patterns and economic change. And this clarifies the shortcomings of technological determinism, which tends to valorize dominant technologies at the expense of understanding the social meaning of the interplay of all technologies. In its reserved celebration of the re-appropriation of amateur film formats for purposes of subverting, re-framing and perverting the patterns and forms of dominant cultural production "POP OFF" does a service for all those who desire, as Kováčová states in the foreword to the catalogue, "affordability, accessibility and autonomy in controlling one's vision."

John McCullough lives and works in Toronto. Currently he is a contract teacher at York University's Department of Film and Video.

Memory and Community

The Electrical Field

BY KERRI SAKAMOTO
VINTAGE CANADA, TORONTO, 1998

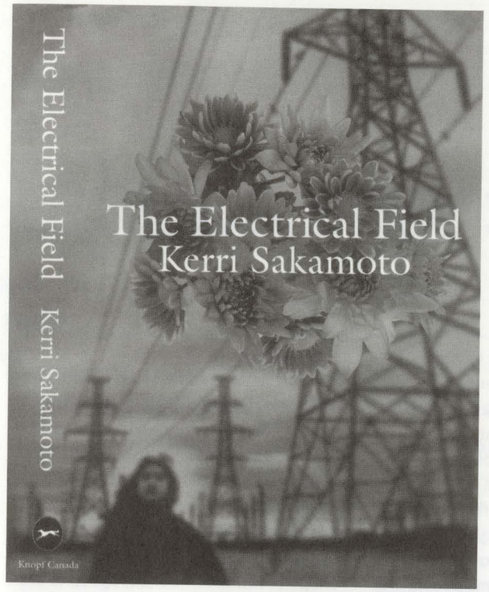
REVIEW BY RENUKA SOOKNANAN

Kerri Sakamoto's *The Electrical Field* is a reminder of the complexities of community and the work of memory. Electrical towers, depicted on the cover of the book, figure prominently in Sakamoto's storytelling. The seemingly endless flow of electrical energy acts as a metaphor for the limitless forces of tragedy, trauma, fear and hope, thrown against the psychic instability echoed in the lives of each character. The towers signify the cost of memory and forgetting throughout the story, most notably through the subtext of Japanese internment. More than just tall standing structures, the electrical columns are "cages," defining the importance of secrets internal to community and the repetition involved in the play of memory. Further, the towers loom large as part of the archeological site of memory, where what is unearthed reveals the intricacies and crafting qualities of Sakamoto's pen. A central and driving question in the novel positions the framework of memory against truth and its repercussions.

Soon after we are introduced to the main characters in the novel, a murder takes place. This incident is integral to unravelling the stories of three Japanese families, the Saitos, Yanos and Nakamuras, and the consequences of their connection and relationships in a small town in Ontario. The interiority of the novel comes alive as we are drawn into the inner psyche of Asako Saito, our narrator and guide into this community. Asako's life is defined by the care she takes for her ailing and elderly father and a younger brother, Stum, with whom she shares an unemotional familial distance. The distance between the two siblings is marked by the death of their older brother, Eiji, whose memory gently haunts the novel as well as its protagonist. The constant recalling of Eiji back to the present is one way Asako struggles to deal with her mourning, her melancholia and the possibilities for love. When a friendship develops between Asako and her younger neighbour, Sachi Nakamura, it produces both a maternal surfacing for Asako as well as a deep and hidden expression of her search for love. It is Sachi who breaks the monotony of Asako's everyday existence through her insistence and quest for the truth. Truth becomes an important narrative device that enables us to search for clues to the murder and clues to the ravages of history on the psyche.

Sakamoto writes with vivid clarity the ambivalence of "home" in this novel. We are drawn a very detailed mapping of the home and nation duality; the idea of Canada as home is challenged by the story of interned life. Noted throughout the text, the varied whispers of Japanese internment propel us into the everyday survival struggles waged by internees through the repetition of memory. Sakamoto involves us in the drab and daily routine of internment, noting that there was "nowhere to escape to; we were already nowhere" (p. 271), Asako disrupts the idea of home as comfort or safe space. Home in Canada was a "nowhere" place. The underlying tone and foreboding feeling of inescapability in the novel is magnified by the eventual death of Eiji while interned. In this instance memory and death enter into a close proximity as Sakamoto details her protagonist's ongoing imprisonment through remembering and recalling her brother's accident. *The Electrical Field* makes other vital connections between the caged-in feeling of the camps and its uncanny similarity to the electrical field's sense of containment. Sakamoto scripts death and internment as parallel forces.

When Chisako Yano is found murdered in a car with her white lover, Sakamoto utilizes the memory of her main character to explore a racist historical legacy in the landscape of Canadian national identity. Sakamoto strategically crafts the costs of being a "visible/invisible" minority in the building of nation. Introducing the perils of internment life lived by Japanese Canadians, Sakamoto investigates the stakes involved in the construction of Canada as a nation of immigrants. Japanese internment in Canada began following the bombing of Pearl Harbour. As the war in the Pacific heated up all persons of Japanese descent, including those who were Canadian citizens, were relocated to the Canadian interior into camps. As a result of racist and governmental so-called "national security" propaganda, Japanese residents were carted off to specified housing, which were, at one time, livestock facilities. Most Japanese lost their homes and businesses, and after the war some were repatriated to Japan while others moved to Eastern and Central Canada. Anti-Japanese sentiment peaked during this time; Japanese were characterized as "dangerous enemies," which prompted the establishment of the



War Measures Act. William Lyon Mackenzie King's involvement in the proliferation of racist violence against Japanese Canadians is an underlying haunt in this book.

The struggle for redress is very important in *The Electrical Field*. Japanese redress in Canada was a campaign to acknowledge accountability and responsibility of the Canadian government's mistreatment of its Japanese citizens. Working through memory, redress stands as a reminder of unbearable loss. In the novel it would be simplistic to read Yano's campaign for redress as mere compensation, especially in light of his vision for collectivity. His campaign is full of moral scripting and ethical responsibility and most of all, testimony. Essentially, redress would bring resolution to the anguish Yano feels throughout the novel, but equally his efforts would represent some type of justice gained. Sakamoto prevails as storyteller when she introduces tensions and strains in the ethical structure of the memory of internment and the desire for community, which disallows Yano into guilty admission. For if Yano admits what his plans are, he becomes as unethical as those in government he detests. His eventual downward spiral is a juxtaposition: his campaigning (read: honour) is placed side by side with his wife's extramarital activities (read: shame).

The formidable sense of community that brews under the surface in this book constantly reverts back to the infamy of Japanese internment. Masashi Yano is a pivotal character who reinforces the wish for community: "we have to stick together." The assumed "we" which constructs Yano's notion of community is both a command and an essential desire for sameness. Such a need for togetherness is abruptly challenged by Asako who remarks, "as if being nihojin in the same neighbourhood could melt every disagreeable difference between us" (p. 108). What is disavowed here are the complexities and tensions involved in the conjoined composition of memory and community; how do Yano's memories from internment provoke him into a sedimentary and unitary construction of community. Here Sakamoto problematizes the couplet of nation and community by unsteadying the very constructedness of community. By introducing a narrative of nation into her story *vis à vis* the stark horror of internment, Sakamoto is able to make strategic commentary on community and citizenship. This is one of the triumphs of the novel.

Sakamoto's writing of dreams in *The Electrical Field* is one way she explores the work of the unconscious and its vital connective function to the content of the repressed (that which is unbearable) as well as the return of the repressed. Sakamoto writes dream sequences to suggest to us that "there were things unspeakable by day" (p. 54). Dreams, like the play of memory in the novel, highlight the unspeakable horrors of internment and its future consequences. Most importantly, as Asako remarks, "Dreams told me nothing new; *nothing I did not already know*. But they sharpened my memory, making me more certain of how things happened" (p. 148, emphasis added). An interesting relationship between memory and dreams is made thinkable: whatever Asako repressed by day, the unspeakable, returned to her by night in her dreams.

Towards the very end of the novel the mystery of Chisako's murder is solved. The search for the truth in *The Electrical Field* reveals hidden secrets and guilty fears of involvement. Truth is a narrative apparatus through which Sakamoto resolves repressed anxiety and angst in her characters. In the end, Sakamoto writes a certain ease and a sense of reflexiveness to Asako. However, if you are searching for Asako's resolve at the end of the novel, you will have been mislead by the ingenuity of Sakamoto's storytelling exploration. For understanding Asako's character's truth you must return to the very first chapter where Asako concludes, "for I had long ago understood that you had to live in the midst of things to be affected, in the swirl of the storm, you might say. And once you did, only then could you be for ever changed" (p. 16).

Kerri Sakamoto's first novel is an unsettling and disruptive excavation of history, nation and community. The complexity with which her characters are brought to life is matched only by the brave commentary made about culture, identity and tradition. What will stay with you long after you have read *The Electrical Field* is the elevated sustainability and fluidity of the project of memory.

Renuka Sooknanan lives in Toronto and is working on her dissertation.

Maps of Sound

Giscome Road

By C.S. Giscombe

Dalkey Archive Press, Illinois State University, 1998

REVIEW BY PETER HUDSON

Thankfully we haven't come down to converting residential schools into boutique hotels or internment camps into commemorative theme parks, though it seems that given the bizarre politics of race and culture in this country, anything is possible. Already we've seen the geographies of legislated racism become state-sponsored sites of the celebration of diversity and multiculturalism. Vancouver's Chinatown was a ghetto before it became a tourist attraction and official heritage site. Africville, during its latest moment of fame garnered through the opening night press for George Boyd's play *Consecrated Ground* triggered a minor national spectacle of white liberals slaking a perverse desire for public humiliations.

Here's a question: where do people of colour go when we're not sheltering from the long winter of white racism? Do we become white? Invisible? Do we simply disappear, as if an ontology of Blackness in Canada is overdetermined by racism, and without racism we would cease to exist. Sadly, there are enough people of colour working in the arts who have adopted this posture. Perhaps it's too much time spent around those white peers who love to see you as victim. Perhaps those crafty coloureds who know how to calculate the ratio between arts council dollars and the representation of victimhood actually enjoy the status of official minority, official victim, official coloured, and couldn't live without this designation.

Either way, this mentality shows through in the poetics of coloured folk across the country. Amongst the textual strategies proliferating during the current quasi-renaissance of Black Canadian writing has been the melancholy celebration of forgotten negro pioneers and lost negro histories. I'm not thinking of the generic Afrocentric poetics that one finds en masse in Toronto, but the regional, often provincial, forms of writing found in those corners of Canada where some people are still surprised to discover that Black people exist, no matter if they've been there for generations.

This writing is obsessed with inscribing local geographies with the signs, codes and histories of a forgotten Black presence. Beyond the critique (perhaps "acknowledgment" is a better word) of racism, it professes a surprising degree of sympathy for the Canadian state. It's formally conservative, relying on realist conventions and a painful literalness that speaks to an internal desire to police representation as a means to prevent the ambiguities of interpretation and maintain the illusion of a coherent, corporatized sense of self. Politically its demands are limited to asking for inclusion within the Canadian nation-state—as if it weren't for the small problem of racism, Canada wouldn't be so bad.

But after the lost Black history has been recorded, after negroes have been spotted in Whitehorse, Drumheller, Dawson Creek and Rimouski, then what?

Don't get me wrong. I'm not against revisionist historiography. I've been known to dabble in it myself. But I guess I'm a little tired of the simple insertion of black bodies into the space-time of the Canadian nation-state as if this gesture is in itself radical. I'm also frustrated by the critical discourse surrounding this work. Besides simply celebrating the pedestrian fact that yes, black folks do write, its major imperative appears to be establishing a bogus lineage that forces texts from vastly different periods and locations to speak to each other, not in a comparative sense, but as if some kind of natural, textual succession is implicit. The notion of an African Canadian canon that undergirds this view is deeply problematic since until recently, texts written by Black people in Canada (does that make them African Canadian?) spoke less to each other than to the mainstream practices of English, French, American and Canadian literature.

The end result of all of this? A retrograde identity politics that is easily digestible within the cultural management industry and that has a middle-of-the-road, midlist appeal among certain white audiences. Especially during February.

Maybe it shouldn't be surprising that one of the few Black Canadian texts that I've read recently that doesn't fall prey to such problems was written by an American. *Giscome Road*, C.S. Giscombe's wonderful book of poetry, approaches these questions of race, geography and history without recourse to the nostalgia or literalness that plagues much of the developmental works of African Canadian literature.

As an African American, Giscombe may have less at stake, less need for a crude of all canons, and allows Giscombe the space to write history as playful, sonorous myth. If we assume that these connections are constructed, Giscombe seems to ask, what are the limits to the ways we imagine a history to explain them.

Judging by *Giscome Road*, the possibilities are limitless. With lines carefully cicatrized across the page, the opening section, "Sound Carries" traces a genealogy through a song and name called forth by the music of moving water, eventually meandering to its

SOURCE

(& MOUTH): John Robert Giscome, "a negro
miner," "a pioneer," John Robert

Giscome, "native of Jamaica West India"
(self-described: "miner

& explorer"), he flourished in 19th C. British
Columbia,

found a short way up into the Arctic & back out.

This is the extent of the historical origins that Giscombe provides. Giscome remains a "rootless surname" an elusive sign and figure

After whom: Giscome Canyon & the Giscome
Rapids on the Fraser,

Giscome, B.C. in the Cariboo, Giscome Portage
between

the watersheds, the Giscome Portage Historical
Site,

the Giscome Portage Historical Society,

real Giscome Road from Old Cariboo Hwy in
Prince George to Rte 16

—fabled Yellowhead Hwy—east of town.

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Peter Hudson is a Toronto writer.

MAPS OF SOU

Giscome Road

BY C.S. GISCOMBE
DALKEY ARCHIVE PRESS, ILLINOIS ST

REVIEW BY PETER HUDS

Thankfully we haven't come down to con verting residential schools into boutique hotels or internment camps into commer orative theme parks, though it seems tha given the bizarre politics of race and cul ture in this country, anything is possible. Already we've seen the geographies of legislated racism become state-sponsored sites of the celebration of diversity and multiculturalism. Vancouver's Chinatown was a ghetto before it became a tourist attraction and official heritage site. Africville, during its latest moment of fame garnered through the opening night press for George Boyd's play *Consecrated Ground* triggered a minor national spectacle of white liberals slaking a perverse desire for public humiliations.

Here's a question: where do people of colour go when we're not sheltering from the long winter of white racism? Do we become white? Invisible? Do we simply disappear, as if an ontology of Blackness in Canada is overdetermined by racism, and without racism we would cease to exist. Sadly, there are enough people of colour working in the arts who have adopted this posture. Perhaps it's too much time spent around those white peers who love to see you as victim. Perhaps those crafty coloureds who know how to calculate the ratio between arts council dollars and the representation of victimhood actually enjoy the status of official minority, official victim, official coloured, and couldn't live without this designation.

Either way, this mentality shows through in the poetics of coloured folk across the country. Amongst the textual strategies masse in Toronto, but the regional, often provincial, forms of writing found in those corners of Canada where some people are still surprised to discover that Black people exist, no matter if they've been there for generations.

This writing is obsessed with inscribing local geographies with the signs, codes and histories of a forgotten Black presence. Beyond the critique (perhaps "acknowledgment" is a better word) of racism, it professes a surprising degree of sympathy for the Canadian state. It's formally conservative, relying on realist conventions and a painful literalness that speaks to an internal desire to police representation as a means to prevent the ambiguities of interpretation and maintain the illusion of a coherent, corporatized sense of self. Politically its demands are limited to asking for inclusion within the Canadian nation-state—as if it weren't for the small problem of racism, Canada wouldn't be so bad.

But after the lost Black history has been recorded, after negroes have been spotted in Whitehorse, Drumheller, Dawson Creek and Rimouski, then what?

Don't get me wrong. I'm not against revisionist historiography. I've been known to dabble in it myself. But I guess I'm a little tired of the simple insertion of black bodtive appears to be establishing a bogus lineage that forces texts from vastly different periods and locations to speak to each other, not in a comparative sense, but as if some kind of natural, textual succession is implicit. The notion of an African Canadian canon that undergirds this view is deeply problematic since until recently, texts written by Black people in Canada (does that make them African Canadian?) spoke less to each other than to the mainstream practices of English, French, American and Canadian literature.

The end result of all of this? A retrograde identity politics that is easily digestible within the cultural management industry and that has a middle-of-the-road, midlist appeal among certain white audiences. Especially during February.

Maybe it shouldn't be surprising that one of the few Black Canadian texts that I've read recently that doesn't fall prey to such problems was written by an American. *Giscome Road*, C.S. Giscombe's wonderful book of poetry, approaches these questions of race, geography and history without recourse to the nostalgia or literalness that plagues much of the developmental works of African Canadian literature.

As an African American, Giscombe may have less at stake, less need for a crude didacticism in the writing, than his Canadian brothers and sisters on the ground. Yet *Giscome Road* is also an incredible work of affiliation and relation that implicates itself in the local fronts of a transnational cultural politics of diaspora. Giscombe attaches himself to these regional skirmishes through a sort of textual slippage. Only a consonant separates Giscombe's surname from that of John Robert Giscome, the nineteenth-century Jamaican explorer and miner whose name graces various locations in northern British Columbia. The single consonant seems to emphasize the essential constructedness of all canons, and allows Giscombe the space to write history as playful, sonorous myth. If we assume that these connections are constructed, Giscombe seems to ask, what are the limits to the ways we imagine a history to explain them.

Judging by *Giscome Road*, the possibilities are limitless. With lines carefully cicatrized across the page, the opening section, "Sound Carries" traces a genealogy through a song and name called forth by the music of moving water, eventually meandering to its

SOURCE

(& MOUTH): John Robert Giscome, "a negro
miner," "a pioneer," John Robert

Giscome, "native of Jamaica West India"
(self-described: "miner

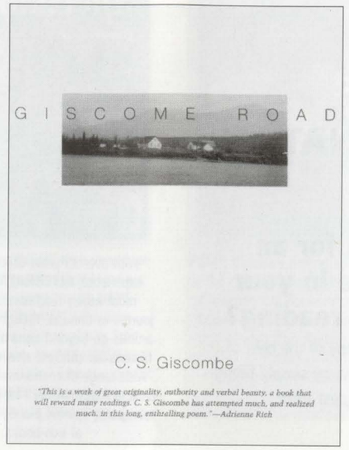
& explorer"), he flourished in 19th C. British
Columbia,

found a short way up into the Arctic & back out.

This is the extent of the historical origins that Giscombe provides. Giscome remains a "rootless surname" an elusive sign and figure

After whom: Giscome Canyon & the Giscome
Rapids on the Fraser,

Giscome, B.C. in the Cariboo, Giscome Portage
between



the watersheds, the Giscome Portage Historical
Site,

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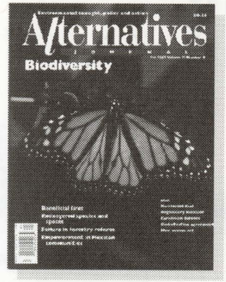

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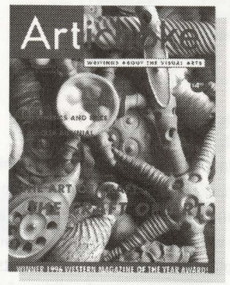

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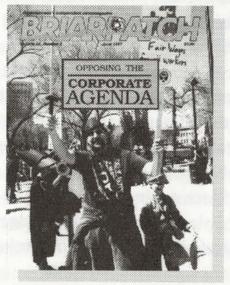

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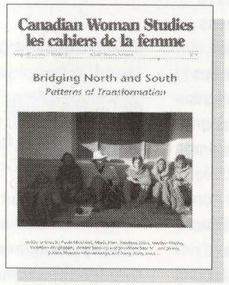

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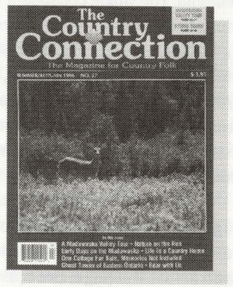

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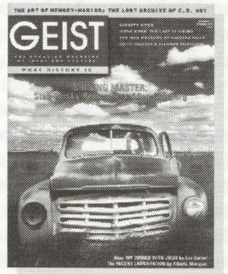

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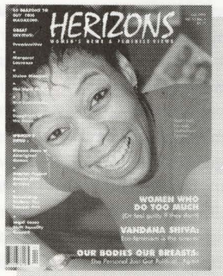

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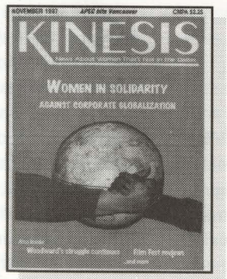

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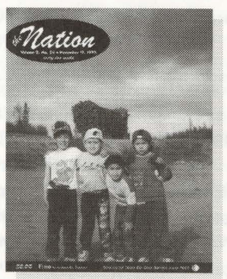

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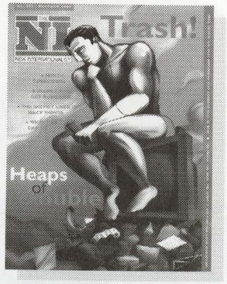

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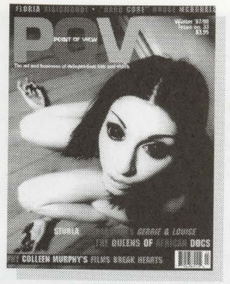

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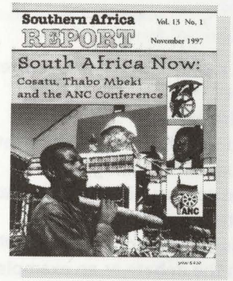

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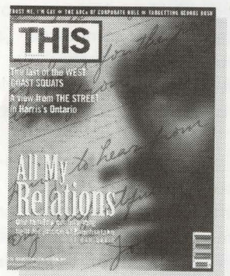

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SHORT FUSE

Party Politics:

Visions and Versions of Caribana

A FUSE Panel
11 February 1999

When a friend invited me to attend the "Caribana" debate, held on February 11, 1999 at the El Convento Rico club, I eagerly accepted. The impressive line up of panelists and respondents included: Ramabai Espinet, poet/writer/critic/academic; Henry Gomez, educator/calypsonian/96–97 Caribana Committee Chairperson; Nalo Hopkinson, author; M. Nourbese Philip, poet/writer; Honor Ford-Smith, teacher/writer; and last but not least, Peter Hudson, magazine editor. As one can imagine, being a patron of the Caribana festivities for the last three years, I was curious to hear what these brilliant minds thought about the festival's present state and its seemingly ambiguous future. I envisioned an evening of productive discussion where "everyone" felt comfortable enough to sincerely share their concerns, which as a result would lead to functional ideas on making the event more of a success. However, I was deeply disappointed.

Do not misinterpret me, the debate was not a total waste of time. I gained knowledge pertaining to Caribana's historical roots. At least I think I did. Let's see. As far as historical "perspective" goes, there was heated debate between Henry Gomez and a "heckler" (Clifton Joseph) as to whether Caribana is a spin off of Trinidad's carnival, or if its roots extend from several different Caribbean nations. My point of view—does it matter? Caribana symbolizes a time of solidarity—real or imagined. The ideology on which all carnivals are based.

Another topic that generated much discussion, among the panelists and several members of the audience, was the issue of having larger numbers of youths involved in the festival at every level. This topic generated questions, but only one panelist (M. Nourbese Philip) made an obvious suggestion—"they" (that is, the Caribana Committee) should go through the schools. It only makes sense—after all, that's where the youths are!

I feel very strongly about the inclusion of youths because I fall into the proposed targeted "youth" bracket. Being a twenty-three-year-old Jamaican immigrant, I would be honoured to have the opportunity to participate in the organizing of such an internationally renowned event. The problem, however, is unintentional EXCLUSION. Let us use the language used in the debate as an example. Sitting in the audience, I felt like a moron. Now I know I ain't no dummy, but the language used was unbelievably academic and, consequently, I ended up guessing what quite a few of the words being used meant. And I sincerely believe that I was not alone. Given that scenario, I find it a bit unrealistic to expect the "youths" to willingly participate in an event that appears so exclusive. I do realize that only one of the panelists was **noted** as having a pro-active role in the planning of a past festival; I have however, got the impression that while the "established committee" (an in-club it seems) claims to be interested in drawing new blood, there is no evidence of it reflected in actual practice. There were a few other points brought up, none however that I wish to recant.

I found that evening to be one of frivolous talk, confrontation and socializing. I would like to end by saying that my writing this article is not an attempt to offend anyone. As I feel that everyone came to table with honourable intentions, my criticisms are merely a means of challenging "the establishment" to come up with actual strategies to implement proposed changes.

In retrospect, **No** I did not learn anything and **Yes** it was a total waste of time.

—Niyabingy

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