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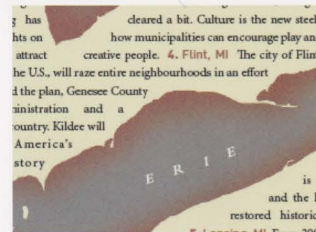
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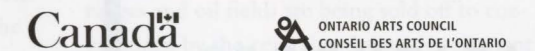
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Photo: Lisa Kannakko

WE'RE IN THIS TOGETHER

"We're in This Together" is one of the messages of *Cross Border Communication*, a projection created by Windsor-based artist collective Broken City Lab to send messages across the Detroit River. The intention of the project is to transform communication between the two cities and propose a new set of relations, now that the ones based in economic exchange have collapsed. BCL's gesture is a good starting point for this issue of Fuse, which explores the work of a number of artists and collectives who are engaged in projects intended to dislodge popular narratives and propose models and value systems that offer alternatives to the existing order.

In this issue's cover story, *Detroit is Our Future*, Lee Rodney considers both the recent media interest in Detroit and the interventions of the many artists and collectives that are working in the city. With a dwindling population base and collapsed manufacturing industry, Detroit serves as an example of the repercussions of the massive capital flight and out-migration that many cities fear — resulting in a devastated landscape and crumbling social and economic infrastructure.

While the lack of development and market interest has created devastating living conditions, it has also produced an environment where municipal laws and codes of conduct are opened by default, creating opportunities to shift value-systems away from the market and imagine new equilibriums between the city, social communities and the natural elements. Artists, activists, academics and community organizers have worked to actively re-imagine Detroit through urban agriculture, site-specific interventions, artist residencies and neighborhood-specific art and development projects that re-appropriate and redefine the city. Interestingly, as many have worked to implement the

change they seek, they have also confronted the tensions inherent in community based interventions and in the contradictions of applying theory to lived reality.

In this issue's interview *Images of Disturbance*, film and video artist Amar Kanwar reflects on power and resistance in a conversation with Richard Fung. Speaking to questions of nationalisms, environmental devastation, corporate globalization, caste and class, Kanwar reflects on how much of his work is born out of a feeling of disturbance. "Rivers, mountain ranges and oil fields are being sold off to corporations by the central and state government in India." He writes, "Why do we remove a colonial empire to keep on replacing it with different versions of the same thing?"

Srimoyee Mitra shares a similar concern in her article *Future Diagnostics*. Considering the effectiveness of national biennials in generating the critical discourse that they propose in their themes and titles, Mitra reflects on the success of this year's Sharjah Biennial in the historical and political context of the Emirates — a site with a palpable history of fragmentation, marginalization and displacement.

In light of Sharjah's theme of *Provisions for the Future*, Mitra asks, "after a period of silence within the art world, issues concerning violence, anxiety, memory and displacement have become common themes in the major international biennials — but do they foster a better understanding of the scale and complexity of recurring violence, displacement and marginalization or simply repackage existing assumptions with the glossy packaging of contemporary art?"

And perhaps this is a key question that underlies this issue — how do we create work that does not simply re-package what already exists but effectively challenges and creates alternatives.

— Izida Zorde

DETROIT IS OUR FUTURE

Lee Rodney

Ultimately the city, including the suburbs, is a commodity of investment that amortizes in time, and is programmed to die from its inception.

—Kyong Park¹

A REPORT FROM THE FRONT LINES OF THE RECESSION

Mock-up view of *Cross Border Communication*, 2009 by Broken City Lab. View from Detroit looking south from the Renaissance Centre. Courtesy: Justin A. Langlois.

Detroit has become synonymous with a moribund auto industry that we hear about repeatedly on the nightly news. However, it is less frequently acknowledged that the sprawl machine set in motion by the automakers was a covert design that imperceptibly destroyed the city in a little over 50 years. This urban paradox is legible at a short distance from Detroit, where cities such as Troy and Canton, new suburbs with new identities, have sprung up along the interstate since the 1950s. These areas are only now beginning to show signs of fatigue. At the same time, Detroit's skeletal remains have become iconic: from Stan Douglas' *Detroit Photos* (1997) to the stunning aerial shots of an abandoned Michigan Central Station that open Godfrey Reggio's film, *Naqoyqatsi* (2002), these structures have served as the sign of American capitalism in ruin.

Lately, Detroit has been garnering attention from mainstream media as the poster child for the recession. In an age of diminished capital flows, perhaps there is much to learn from a place that has survived on adversity for some time. In August last year, Fox News ran a story about one-dollar properties near Hamtramck, sparking a flurry of media interest in the bargain basement of American real estate, a kind of drawn-out fire sale of what remains. At the same time, the city has been portrayed less sensationally in *Harpers*, *The New York Times* and *Slate.com*, and graciously presented on the pages of *Dwell Magazine*. Whether exhibited through the lens of high or low media, Detroit seems to be garnering a kind of popular interest not seen for decades.

It is difficult to say exactly what forces have converged to bring this city into the spotlight once again after years of disavowal and neglect, or to draw any conclusions about whether Detroit could ever be subject to a full cycle of gentrification. What is certain, however, is that many artists, designers and architects are no longer just interested in depicting Detroit as subject matter, meditation on late capitalism, modernity as failed utopia. Rather, a number of people are looking at Detroit as a challenging and complex urban experiment, one that attempts to chart a different course than the repeat cycles of business development and



Stan Douglas. *Michigan Central Station*, 1997/98. Courtesy: the artist and David Zwirner, New York.

demolition that have plagued Detroit since the early 20th century. This phenomenon is not new: there is an important legacy of urban research that has been building here for over 40 years. Architects Steven Vogel and Kyong Park, artist Tyree Guyton and radical geographer Bill Bunge have in their various ways been kept participant-observers of Detroit's strange urban condition.

But it now seems that there is a critical mass of interest in Detroit, and much of the recent activity has taken root in the form of artist/architectural collectives. Object Orange (Detroit. Demolition. Disneyland.), an anonymous collective of artists from the area, began painting the exterior of houses slated for demolition in 2006, just prior to the Superbowl festivities late that year. The group specifically chose "Tigerific" orange, from a line of paints branded by the Disney Corporation and Behr, and sold, not so conveniently, through Home Depot. In the city of Detroit, there are approximately 12,000 abandoned homes and buildings and only one Home Depot, located at the outer fringes of the city limits. As an icon of home improvement Home Depot has created an industry that grew alongside the housing bubble. While new home construction proliferated 20 miles outside the city centre, home demolition in

Detroit's inner core has been proceeding apace. The trend to date has been to tear down vacant houses when the city could afford to do so, but demolition, like all things, costs money and many of these houses stand vacant for years. The city owns over 7,000 of these properties. When a house is slated for demolition it is marked with a capital D on the side. In order to make these properties and this process more visible, the group began covering the entire facade with orange paint, including any trim, broken windows, and foundation. The bright orange makeover lends these dilapidated structures a kind of last breath, a Disneyesque swan song before disappearing from the landscape.

Demolition has become a kind of strange panacea for the urban ills of the rust belt and is quite a robust industry in Detroit at the moment. Detroit City Council voted in April of this year to tear down its most famous ruin, Michigan Central Station, an impressive Beaux-Arts complex from 1913 built by Warren and Wetmore/Reed and Stern, the same architectural firms that designed Grand Central Station in New York. The building has stood empty for nearly 25 years, and has long been stripped of its copper and marble. Many neighbourhood residents consider the empty structure an



Object Orange. *Auburndale Site #1*, 2007–2009. Photo: Object Orange. Courtesy: Paul Kotula Projects.

eyesore, a painful reminder of a succession of failed plans to renovate and revive the station and the surrounding district. However, Detroit's impressive architectural history is rapidly disappearing and the line separating Detroit's economic development corporation (which tends to favor demolition projects and flashy new sports arenas and casinos) and the creative communities couldn't be more pronounced.

The Detroit Unreal Estate Agency formed nearly two years ago in response to the question of value as a function of real estate speculation, specifically those values that have rendered the city of Detroit a failure within a post-industrial, globalized economy. The Agency has opened up an ongoing dialogue about Detroit as a model for exploring alternate forms of urbanism. Andrew Herscher, one of the group's founding members, stresses that Detroit offers an immediate possibility to "...invest not in a better world to come beyond or after capitalism, but in actually existing enclaves within capitalism, enclaves where the extraction of value in economic terms creates space for the imagination and cultivation of other values."² As such, the Agency's website works to inventory, document and contextualize

what is currently taking place in Detroit, to tap into existing creative communities and to attract new ones.

It seems that the Detroit Unreal Estate Agency has provided an important antidote to what might be called the Richard Florida effect. Recently, Florida has been referring to Detroit as the city that we ought to forget so that we can concentrate our energies and our money in the 'elite cities' that have successfully demonstrated the full cycles of gentrification. In both the *Atlantic* (March, 2009) and in a major interview for NPR, he espoused a vision of creativity that was far more specious than the one put forth in his early book, *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2002). In a recessionary era, according to Florida, creativity has become that special *je-ne-sais-quoi* possessed by those working in the financial industries. Here talent is measured in terms of the baroque maneuvers of CEOs and their underlings. Everyone else (including the artists that he once held up as urban pioneers) should be consigned to tolerating high rents in big cities to prop up the free market. Detroit (and places like it) fog up Florida's picture because many Detroiters have chosen to remain, thus opting out of the mobile workforces (and the culture of precarity) that is needed to keep global capital moving.



Detroit Unreal Estate Agency, Berenika Boberska, Mitch Cope, Christian Ernsten, Edwin Gardner, Joost Janmaat, Gina Reichert and Jeroen Visser. *Urban Chandelier*, 2009. Photo: Corine Smith-Vermeulen. Courtesy: Berenika Boberska and Andrew Herscher.

Recently, along with art collective Powerhouse (Gina Reichart and Mitch Cope), the Detroit Unreal Estate Agency hosted a residency for artists visiting from the Dutch Art Academy that proved to be an awkward clash of worlds and ideals. Not that this should seem surprising. Many of the visiting artists expressed their discomfort and ambivalence about responding aesthetically to Detroit as outsiders. However, in spite of the uneasy situation they produced a makeshift outdoor chandelier that ran from the electrical wires of a vacant lot without street lights. This was one of the most interesting objects of urban intervention that I have seen in Detroit, and an insightful commentary on the difficulties of living in a city without basic public services.

The Detroit Unreal Estate Agency is both local and international: this is at once their strength and, arguably, their weakness. Detroit makes claims on us that are tied to violent American histories of class and racial disparity, and the trend up until recently has been to disavow any affiliation with the city. In an oft-quoted essay, Jerry Herron has powerfully claimed that “we are — all of us — not from Detroit,” referring to a longstanding trend in the greater metropolitan region to identify with Detroit only temporarily, say in the time it takes to identify an international airline code.³ However, another picture of Detroit has been emerging through shrinking cities research that examines the phenomenon of depopulation in older industrial cities (Liverpool, Halle/Leipzig, Ivanovo, Detroit) and their potential to change and transform through the process of shrinkage. In this framework Detroit shares attributes with cities like Berlin and Pittsburgh, which have both seen significant population declines while maintaining vibrant cultures. Over the last decade, there has been a groundswell of Detroit city pride that would seem to go against Herron’s poignant observation, especially in the strange form of the Detroit-Berlin axis. “*Ich bin ein Detroiter*” is a popular slogan in this context. Detroit techno has brought many Germans to Detroit and many Detroiters to Berlin; this is a longstanding phenomenon, as Marcel O’Gorman has pointed out in “Digital Detroit: Tourists in the Apocalypse,” an essay outlining the draw that the city has for those seeking urban exploration in the form of extreme adventure.⁴ O’Gorman is careful to distinguish between good and bad urban exploration, good and bad blogging, as both have been integral to the upsurge of interest in Detroit. Detroit’s virtualization has presented some concrete dilemmas that are being debated implicitly and explicitly, and the range of recent projects raises difficult questions that are not easily addressed (though many would claim to have the answers). It seems important to reiterate some basic questions, such as who can represent whom and to what ends? Is Detroit only for Detroiters? What makes one a Detroiter? Is one born into Detroit or can one become a Detroiter? I live in Windsor, but many people in my neighborhood claim (on Facebook) that they are from Detroit.

DETROIT IS OUR FUTURE

Across the river, a mere 250 meters away from downtown Detroit, Windsor (Ontario) continues on the path of economic meltdown that has characterized Detroit over the last 50 years. On the Canadian side, the process is somewhat delayed as production in the auto industry reached its peak much later than in the US. Windsor has the lowest population density of any Canadian city, the biggest casino and largest number of swimming pools. This summer, 1,800 municipal employees were on strike over pension benefits. This is partly due to the dwindling tax base which has been moving away to one of three neighbouring townships that were founded in the 1990s.

Windsor’s strange urban geography is a symptom of the auto industry and the repeat cycles of boom and bust that have been occurring since the 1930s, when the two cities were first joined by the Ambassador Bridge and the Detroit-Windsor tunnel. These are mega-projects from the early 20th century and are interesting as historical artifacts; however, the Ambassador Bridge has been running over capacity for nearly 20 years: as an 80-year-old structure it was never built to withstand the 10,000 transport trucks that cross it daily. Huron Church Road, or the Huron Church Corridor as it is sometimes called, is a six-lane road that runs through the city of Windsor, connecting Highway 401 to the Ambassador Bridge. It is often backed up with long traffic queues when border control is tight and the diesel particulate from large concentrations of idling trucks has many Windsor residents concerned about the long-term viability of this old route. The American, privately-owned Ambassador Bridge Company wishes to expand its capacity by twinning the span, while Windsor City Council and the Ontario government have been attempting to get the Michigan Government to back an alternative plan to build a new bridge and approach downriver. As a result, the Huron Church Corridor is hotly contested property.

This summer, the Huron Church Road is host to a series of public art projects, collectively organized under the banner *Open Corridor*, a kind of drive-through exhibition at the base of the Ambassador Bridge, the underwhelming “gateway” to Canada. The exhibition’s organizer, Rod Strickland, notes that the very first building one encounters upon entering Canada from the Ambassador Bridge is a McDonald’s; though this is hardly surprising, it is not the kind of image most Canadians would like to have as a welcome mat at the door to their country. *Open Corridor* attempts to animate this space — its past, present and potentially its future — in a range of temporary projects (including works from Zeke Moores, Noel Harding, Rod Strickland, Kim Adams, Justin Langlois, Lucy Howe, Iain Baxter & David Blatherwick and Robert Weins) that span the first 500 meters of the Huron Church Road. Lucy Howe’s contorted bundle of directional road signs stands kitty-corner to McDonald’s golden arches, and though much smaller in scale and stature they might be



Broken City Lab. *Save a City*, 2009. Courtesy: Justin A. Langlois.

seen to better indicate the complex picture of Canada-US relations as played out on this roadway.

A longer-term project has been taken up by the Windsor-based collective Broken City Lab, which was founded approximately a year ago by a group of local artists in light of the prevailing apathy and tremendous ambivalence harboured by city residents, particularly younger ones who have no interest in the minivan culture of their parents. However, what's interesting about the strategies of Broken City Lab is that they are irrepressibly positive, lacking the kind of cynicism and negativity that afflicts many Windsor residents. Part of their website chronicles this apathy. There are plenty of photographs documenting the sketchy scribbles found on lockers and desks at the University of Windsor. On one desk someone has written "Windsor is Lame" and another has replied, "then go to Detroit." If BCL has a strategy it might be a kind of feel-good DIY ethos and radical inclusivity. In a city like Windsor this is no small feat.

The most important work done by BCL to date is a kind of urban geography, remapping the city through field trips to unremarkable locations. Windsor is a very difficult place to comprehend within existing vocabularies of urbanism: much of it reads like a long-duration strip mall that spans 50 kilometers, emptying out at its point of origin while marching onward in a building fury of stuccoed boutiques and Home Depots the size of football fields. In its wake one encounters dead malls and grey Wal-Marts waiting for weed trees to pop up through the cracked pavement. No one really likes the state of things here, but then nobody seems to be able to account for what's happening either. BCL seems to fulfill the kind of consciousness-raising mandate that is necessary for the introduction of spatial awareness and a sense of shared responsibility for the urban imprint. Part of this task involves charting the rise of pseudo-public space. An early project of theirs involved mapping the lines of sight within the city and locating places where small screens could be attached to

posts and buildings to block the view of the Caesar's sign, thus improving the view of the city. Caesar's Palace, part of an international consortium of casinos, bought and expanded Casino Windsor nearly two years ago. This behemoth complex takes up nearly three city blocks and has served to turn the surrounding streets into a series of empty wind-tunnels, thus making the downtown region even less welcoming than it already was.

Caesar's broadcasts its message to Detroit quite boldly. It is the most visible feature on the Windsor skyline when looking out across the Detroit River from Hart Plaza or the Renaissance Centre in downtown Detroit. Broken City Lab has worked to devise an alternative communications strategy for Windsor, one not dominated by advertisements for a steady lineup of cheeseball entertainment on the Caesar's circuit, from Wayne Newton and Bobby Vinton to Jessica Simpson and KISS. In many ways their public slogans have served as a mantra of collective self-help. Their most ambitious projects to date are still in proposal form, but with the help of a powerful projector, the group plans to send a message back across the river to Detroit one evening. This projection would be the size of the Caesar's sign and it will read, quite simply, "We're in this together."

LEE RODNEY is Assistant Professor of Art History and Visual Culture at the University of Windsor. In 2008, she was a Fulbright Visiting Research Fellow at Arizona State University. Currently she is a member of the Visible City Project and custodian of the *Border Bookmobile*.

1. "The Urban Ecology of Globalization," *Urban Ecology: Detroit and Beyond*, p. 177
2. Andrew Herscher. "Detroit Unreal Estate Agency" *Volume 18*, p.95
3. Jerry Herron. "Not from Detroit" *Urban Ecology: Detroit and Beyond* (ed. Kyong Park) (Hong Kong: MAP Book Publishers, 2005) p.156
4. Marcel O'Gorman. "Digital Detroit: Tourists in the Apocalypse," *CTheory*, 11/29/07

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Materialist Cinema: Workers Leaving the Factory STEVEN LEYDEN COCHRANE



Workers Leaving the Factory, a co-presentation by the Art Gallery of Windsor and the Media City International Festival of Experimental Film and Video Art, brings together works by three contemporary artists and filmmakers who take as their common point of departure Louis Lumière's 1895 *La sortie des usines Lumière*. The first film ever screened publicly, its 47 seconds of footage depict (as the title indicates) a group of workers exiting Lumière's family-owned factory on the outskirts of Lyon.

If Windsor is a powder keg at ground level, the city's tensions are no more easily dispelled on the AGW's darkened third floor, where the exhibition is mounted. Here, however, they assume a markedly different character.

<above and opposite page top> Harun Farocki. *Workers Leaving the Factory in Eleven Decades* (film still), 2006. Courtesy: the artist. <opposite page bottom> Sharon Lockhart. *EXIT* (Bath Iron Works, July 7-11, 2008, Bath, Maine) (film still), 2008. Courtesy: Blum & Poe, Los Angeles, Gladstone Gallery, New York, and Neugerriemschneider, Berlin.

In context, the exhibition's title seems wincingly apt, a plausible motto for Windsor's crumbling manufacturing economy — an increasingly allegorical construct onto which civic identity continues to hang. Given the town's uniquely volatile atmosphere this spring, it's all the more unsettling. *Leaving the Factory* opened at the beginning of May, a month in which Windsor's unemployment rate climbed to 13.8%. It opened days before General Motors announced \$6 billion in first-quarter losses, presaging bankruptcy. It opened one month into an ongoing strike by the city's largest taxicab company and two weeks into a debilitating work stoppage by city employees, both of which stretched well into the summer. Garbage collection had been quite visibly suspended; city properties were wildly overgrown, and banks in town displayed signs proffering special financial planning sessions to bought-out GM employees. The international coterie of filmmakers flown in for the Festival screenings could expect to wait an hour or more for cabs to and from the Capitol Theatre complex.

If Windsor is a powder keg at ground level, the city's tensions are no more easily dispelled on the AGW's darkened third floor,

where the exhibition is mounted. Here, however, they assume a markedly different character.

Distinguished by its silence, its jittery, hand-cranked pacing, exaggerated contrast and pronounced grain, the Lumière film, projected near the elevator, signals an immediate temporal shift, a dissociative resistance similarly evident in the accompanying contemporary works. Of them, German filmmaker Harun Farocki's *Workers Leaving the Factory in Eleven Decades* (2006) and American photographer and filmmaker Sharon Lockhart's *Exit* (2008) are most explicitly concerned with cinematic history and convention, and these most bluntly instantiate the medium's characteristic, spectatorial distance.

Farocki's work, a line of 12 television monitors on the gallery floor that play looped extracts from films spanning the titular 110 years, achieves its remove through repetition. Like-enough scenes of dispersing workers, culled from films as varied as D.W. Griffith's *Intolerance*, Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* and Lars Von Trier's *Dancer in the Dark*, repeat silently or are respectfully hushed, murmuring in indecipherable English, French, German and Italian, punc-

tuated at odd intervals by frames indicating each film's year of production. Also looped, Lockhart's film is essentially *La Sortie* shot from behind, comprising five long takes of employees leaving Maine's Bath Iron Works. In it, few faces are ever visible.

If these preserve a detached gaze, however, Canadian artist Nancy Davenport's resolutely bizarre multi-monitor cycle, *Workers (leaving the factory)* (2008) abruptly returns it. The main body of the work comprises slowly-panning still photographs in which Davenport's subjects — jump-suited aerospace workers identified as Norwegians and their outsourced Chinese counterparts — sit motionless until one or another of them blinks. It's a small rupture, to be sure, but a potentially significant one: the simple illusion of eye contact here acts to destabilize both the viewer's personal remove from what he or she sees and the "natural" organization of filmic convention that permits (and indeed fosters) that relationship.

Ultimately, each piece casts the subject of the laborer as an abstraction, a trope, and for this fact the exhibition could be thought to skew crassly academic, to be too self-reflexive to be outwardly critical. Divorced from



<above and below> Nancy Davenport. *Workers (Leaving the Factory)* (video still), 2005-2008. Courtesy: the artist.

the ingratiating, durational experience of the cinema, however, the installations do at least call attention to our agency in acquiescing to those tropes. One becomes aware of limitations to one's ability to identify with the represented workers and of the decision to regard them or move on. Repetition divests the scenes of any uniqueness and disallows any narrative continuity: the "action" of the exhibition, then, is not of workers leaving this or another factory but of our own movement from one isolated incident to the next.

A useful contrast to this came during the festival proper, with the American filmmaker Ben Russell's *Workers Leaving the Factory (Dubai)* (2008), a final reiteration of the Lumière motif. In the insulating darkness of the

Capitol Theatre, its eight minutes of silent, saturated footage show a crowd of construction workers filing toward the camera against a half-built skyline. Here the sun sets; the film ends; the audience applauds politely; the next film is cued and played.

The cycles of shifts, of conflict and resolution, rhythms of drudgery, righteousness and resentment, have, in Windsor, the inevitability of dream imagery — indeed of cinema. *Workers Leaving the Factory* induces and then unexpectedly interrupts the trance, and we might as viewers come to acknowledge our relationship to, and potentially, our complicity in, the fugue and its continuance. The exhibition delivers no answers, and, while the situation it creates is indeed perilous, even problematic, it may still be constructive.

As I write this, things in town have taken a turn for the spooky: rumors circulate of clandestine garbage-collection by men in white suits and unmarked trucks; metre-lengths of wire have been discovered threaded through the unmowed grass in a municipal park. Downtown, the weeds on the riverfront adjacent to the Gallery are shoulder-high in places; inside, Lumière's century-old footage will continue to flicker until the DVD players are shut off on July 5.

STEVEN LEYDEN COCHRANE is a multidisciplinary visual artist from Tampa, Florida. He recently completed his MFA at the University of Windsor and is currently based in Winnipeg.



artist-run Calgary

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CFMDC V tape

This project was arranged and edited by Mike Hoolboom. It was made possible through the generosity of the Canada Council. It is a co-presentation of Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre and Vtape.

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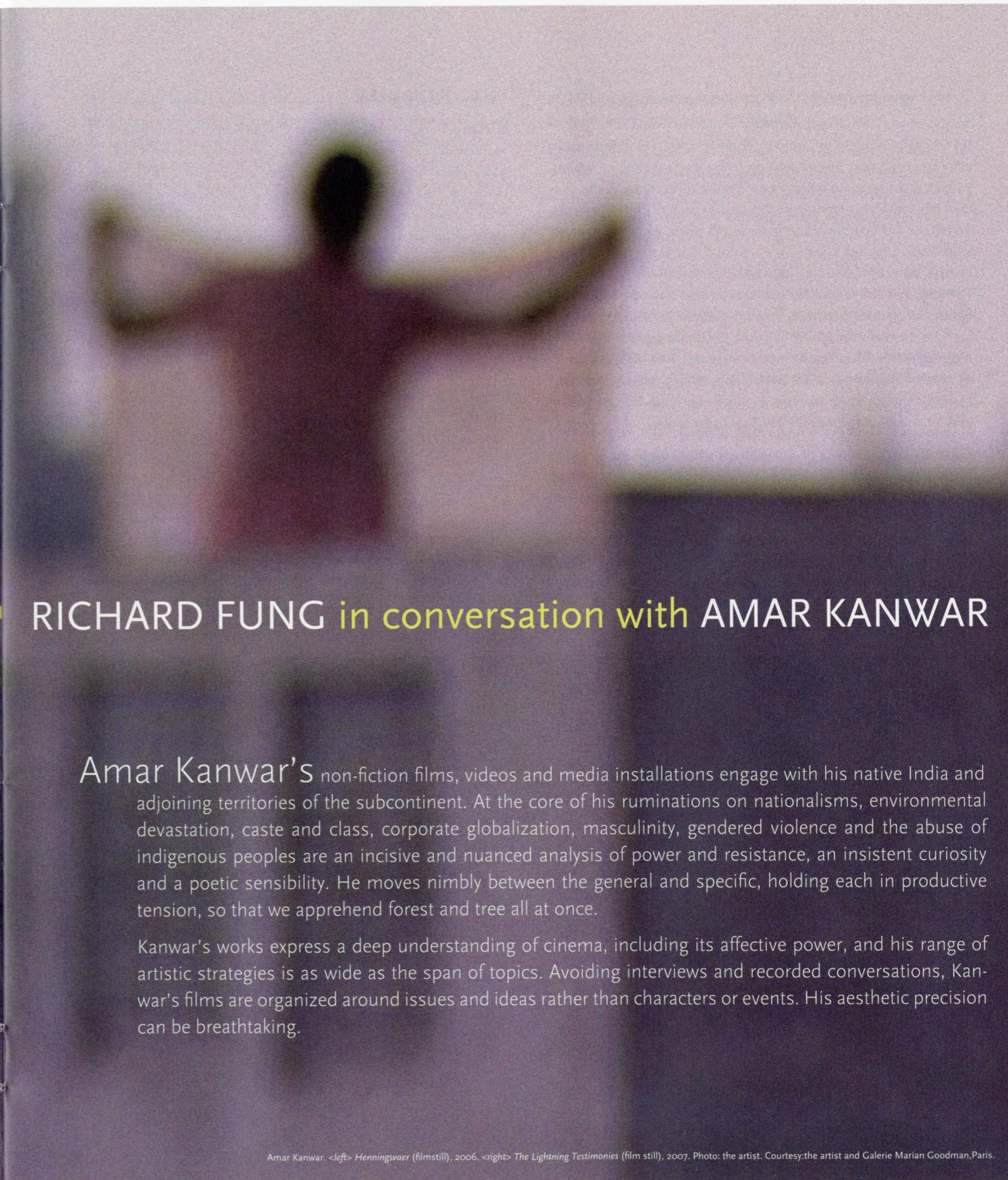
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IMAGES OF

OF

disturbance



RICHARD FUNG in conversation with AMAR KANWAR

Amar Kanwar's non-fiction films, videos and media installations engage with his native India and adjoining territories of the subcontinent. At the core of his ruminations on nationalisms, environmental devastation, caste and class, corporate globalization, masculinity, gendered violence and the abuse of indigenous peoples are an incisive and nuanced analysis of power and resistance, an insistent curiosity and a poetic sensibility. He moves nimbly between the general and specific, holding each in productive tension, so that we apprehend forest and tree all at once.

Kanwar's works express a deep understanding of cinema, including its affective power, and his range of artistic strategies is as wide as the span of topics. Avoiding interviews and recorded conversations, Kanwar's films are organized around issues and ideas rather than characters or events. His aesthetic precision can be breathtaking.

Amar Kanwar. <left> *Henningvaer* (filmstill), 2006. <right> *The Lightning Testimonies* (film still), 2007. Photo: the artist. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Marian Goodman, Paris.

I first discovered Amar Kanwar's work in 2002 at Documenta 11 in Kassel, Germany. At Documenta 12, in 2007, his 8-channel video, *The Lightning Testimonies*, was the most memorable artwork I saw. The installation analyzes sexual violence against women as an intrinsic component of border conflicts across the Indian subcontinent, starting with the sexual assault of 75,000 women during the 1947 partition into India and Pakistan. As the 32-minute loop draws to a close seven of the screens fall dark, focusing attention on the performance of a play based on Mahasweta Devi's story *Draupadi*. Famously translated and theorized by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, its captured heroine is a tortured adivasi (tribal) revolutionary who uses her naked body to shame her police captors. *The Lightning Testimonies* then climaxes with footage of a 2004 demonstration in which 12 naked mothers stormed the gates of a military barracks in the northeast state of Manipur to protest the custodial rape and murder of a young woman by Indian security forces.

Amar Kanwar is based in New Delhi and when I spent the winter of 2009 in that city as a visiting professor at the institution in which he completed his MA in Mass Communication, meeting him was a priority. We did meet in India, but this email correspondence was conducted after my return to Canada. For those unfamiliar with the work of Amar Kanwar I include short descriptions of five of his many productions.

THE INTERVIEW

Richard Fung: A striking feature of your work on India is how you represent the nation. As in many postcolonial countries, the geographical limits of India are arbitrary and contested. Its current borders are the result of British colonial expansion and of partition from Pakistan (now Pakistan and Bangladesh), and several armed separatist groups are currently active, most notably in Kashmir and the North East states. In films such as *The Many Faces of Madness*, *A Night of Prophecy* and *The Lightning Testimonies* you focus on particular localities, often at different ends of the country, but you combine this footage so as to suggest a profound interconnection. It is as if you are simultaneously positing and deconstructing the nation.

Amar Kanwar: Most of us exist within constructs. We grow up in families or schools that construct ways of being and living, thinking, dreaming. Even our aspirations and demons are handed out to us, often in layers over time. You could spend a lifetime within a construct without even knowing it. To live it, it is essential at the least to identify. A continuous process of identification can itself become the process of deconstruction, leading possibly to a momentary space that allows us to create again.

Most of my work emerges from a disturbance, a sense of unease. And the process of its exploration and resolution becomes the film.

For instance, in 1991 I found myself, a young filmmaker, surrounded by thousands of people and shooting for the first time away from the comfort of my own town. It was the funeral of Shankar Guha Niyogi, the leader of probably the largest democratic mass movement of workers, peasants and adivasis (tribal people) in post-independence India. He was assassinated in 1991 in Chattisgarh, where he lived and worked. Those few days and the many images that I returned with created a disturbance. The answer to the question of why he was killed can lead to a series of questions that traverse issues of community rights and common properties to the complex wounds that now construct a web of nationalities.

Rivers, mountains ranges and oil fields are being sold off to corporations by central and state governments in India. Why do we remove a colonial empire to keep on replacing it with different versions of the same thing? Why are several states in India under a different law that grants impunity to the Indian army? Why are we continuous victims of cycles of violence? The violent movement for an independent Sikh nation led to massive state violence and disappearances, which then led to the assassination of an Indian prime minister, which then led to the retaliatory massacre of a few thousand Sikhs in just three days in the capital city of New Delhi in 1984. Which construct are we then imprisoned within? Why did Hindus and Muslims begin a mutual massacre in 1946-47, and what is the power

of this bloodletting that can even now define national politics and personal behaviours and psychologies?

No doubt this nation is unacceptable as it is now and so it is true, as you say, that the films are simultaneously positing and deconstructing the nation, but they are also confronting and conversing with the nation of the inner self — which for me is equally important. That's the interconnection that I explore.

RF: Many of your works feature voice-over narration in a distinctive style that is at once poetic and polemical. The positionality of the narrator is neither "voice of God," nor is it truly autobiographical. The narrator implicates the viewer as "you" or "we" when describing the complicity of the state with national and transnational corporate interests. Can you talk about narration and subject address in your work?

AK: At times, a set of ethical dilemmas about the telling and making of a story coalesce and confront you. To proceed, a temporary resolution of these ethical issues is needed and this can often result in the creation of a new form, the re-articulation of an older form, or a shift in practice. It may seem to be the same but it isn't. And because it has arisen from a certain discomfort it will inherently address that discomfort. For instance, the voice of god can be continuously subverted by the voice of a doubting god. The Sufi and Bhakti

AMAR KANWAR IN CONVERSATION WITH RICHARD FUNG



A SEASON OUTSIDE, 1997, 30 minutes

A SEASON OUTSIDE
A Season Outside takes as its starting point the synchronized performance of ritualized hostility that marks the daily closing of the border at Wagah, a Punjabi village partitioned between India and Pakistan in 1947, and the only road crossing between the two countries. Sponsored by the Dalai Lama's Foundation for Universal Responsibility, this personal essay contemplates the question of violence in politics, culture and nature: "... I am trying to understand the dynamics of division and in turn find a method for dealing with conflict," the artist declares in the narration.

Kanwar does not underestimate the challenges to sustaining non-violence: he recalls the Partition stories of his terrified female relatives in the Punjab nailing the windows shut against possible invaders; he delivers images of Chinese military brutality against unarmed Tibetans; over a sequence

of a puppy mercilessly harassed by crows, he ponders when it might be justified to "arm your truth." Nor does Kanwar romanticize the proponents of philosophies of non-violence. He cites Gandhi's admiration for Leo Tolstoy, whose writings helped shape Gandhi's philosophy of Satyagraha. Kanwar later learns of the years of abuse Tolstoy meted out to his wife Sophia. Is violence in the home any less egregious than violence in the street?

The film ends back at the border at Wagah. But this time it looks beyond the hyper-masculine posturing of the soldiers and focuses instead on the eyes of the Pakistanis as they peer through the iron gates towards the other side. Kanwar finds hope in a bespectacled boy as he stares across the divide, not hostile or suspicious, but pensive and curious. Perhaps this child will be able to free himself from the inherited cycle of violence based on "someone else's memories."

THE MANY FACES OF MADNESS, 2000, 19 minutes

THE MANY FACES OF MADNESS
The Many Faces of Madness opens with a three-minute helicopter shot over the Rajasthan desert as Kanwar intones off-screen, "Four hundred years ago our ancestors — 'our' meaning yours and mine — realized that you cannot drink gold. So they measured every single gradient along the slopes of the plateau and built the most unique one-walled canal that you'll ever see. With just two nights of good rain the water slides along the rocks and comes down along the wall, travelling several miles to fill several lakes and tanks, and so harnessing water for many months." Today, we are told, the land has been divided and sold off. As the camera glides above, the mighty landscape becomes increasingly pock marked with quarries until all signs of the walled canal disappear. As private interests ascend, people and land are left thirsty.

This is only the beginning of a catalogue of environmental and attendant human rights abuses documented across India. In the Himalayas, 70 percent of medicinal plants are uprooted prematurely, and 100 have been patented abroad. On the coast, mangrove forests are bulldozed and fisherfolk displaced to comply with laws that restrict commercial development to land that is unforested and unpopulated. On the plains, companies invent increasingly clever methods to illegally dispose of toxic chemicals, from sending lorries out in the dead of night in search of secluded ditches in which to dump their cargo, to pumping waste directly into the ground water, making its source untraceable. Most shocking is that governmental and non-governmental bodies at state, national and international levels have long documented these practices, but have taken little action. Kanwar's conclusion: "we are a nation at war with our own

traditions are another interesting example of how the relationship to god itself is subverted. Over the last few decades the shift away from the "voice of god" to the autobiographical has been quite interesting. At times, however, it seemed that the negative reaction to the authoritarian voice got converted to become a negative reaction to "a passionate point of view," which further became a negative response to any "point of view," which further became a negative response to "self belief," which in a way fits quite well with a genuine state of helplessness. In such a situation, and simply speaking, the most convenient answer becomes to either be "autobiographical" no matter how self-obsessed, uninteresting or unethical it is, to become ironically absurd in the smartest way possible or to completely erase your own self and manipulate a sense of "openness" by pretending to bring the viewer and the subject close to each other. Of course we also have the formula of the "human interest story" with a slight dash of political correctness. All these answers seemed to me inadequate. In the complex and slip-sliding terrain of the politics of power it would be naïve and self-righteous to play god, to be autobiographical or to intelligently pose looking the other way.

It seems that in life there are always continuous dialogues taking place between the inner self and the outer self. There is also a dialogue with trees, stones and events, and with people near or far, alive or dead. Said and unsaid, clear and whispered. Also, in life

there is a continuous dialogue between the past, the present and the future. Every thought, step or decision is entangled in an oscillating time. You and I exist in this fluidity, and it seems that in a heightened awareness of this fluidity all positions begin to get temporarily and gently dislodged, reversed, and re-understood. And so we may all understand a bit more. It is this narrative experience that I am looking for. It is here that one can seamlessly move between something deeply personal and something that is hugely political and back, and so on.

RF: Do you always shoot with a project in mind, or are you continuously collecting images? I'm spurred to ask this question by the remarkable scene of the puppy being harassed by house crows in *A Season Outside*.

AK: I almost always shoot with an idea in mind and do not randomly collect images. The puppy and the crows happened 10 feet from the border fence between India and Pakistan in the open fields. I think because as a crew we were obsessed with trying to understand violence and resistance we noticed the interaction between the puppy and the crows. Probably on another day we would not have even noticed it. In fact, we were talking that morning about how to prepare to film what we do not expect.

land and water, with our own people, and we do not even know it." Is the inability or unwillingness to acknowledge these outrages a kind of collective psychosis, he asks: "Has the logic of commerce, the opportunity for greed become so powerful that it seems to push us all to a state of delusion, so that we cannot see what is before our own eyes?"

A NIGHT OF PROPHECY

Words and music from the states of Kashmir, Andhra Pradesh, Nagaland and Maharashtra — the north, south, east and west of India — interweave like the warp and weft threads on a tapestry in this exploration of poetry and song as political discourse, a speculation on their power to communicate and address grievances and turmoil. The film opens on Andhra poet G. Venkanna as he rhythmically taps a small stone against the massive granite outcrop on which he is reclined, and sings of a strange night in which an ascetic reveals the meaning of life. Over his song, the visu-

A NIGHT OF
PROPHECY, 2002, 77 minutes

RF: Your films have been sponsored by the National Tree Growers' Cooperative Federation in Gujarat, among other NGOs, but even in these works the voice of the artist is atypically strong.

AK: I suppose if you keep on working in the way you think right, and if you are open to responses along the way without losing your own self, and if you do this for a while then people begin to relate to your vocabulary and support it. If you persist with showing your work to diverse audiences then that experience also generates a process that helps in many ways. Further, the two organizations you refer to have intelligent and enlightened leaderships. I think over time I have understood that even institutions have the capability to imagine and to take risk.

RF: What role did the Mass Communication Research Centre play in the development of your practice?

AK: I am afraid I can't say much about influence because nothing soul-stirring happened there except perhaps to say that it was a space that encouraged a critical and social engagement, and that was very important. I do recall very fondly the passion of Jim Beveridge in his last year there. Seeing an old man speak of images with such love is unforgettable. Seeing flashes of irreverence in another old man, A.J. Kidwai, was also inspiring. I was fortunate to witness and experience the spirit of these two veterans.

RF: Documenta 11 curator Sarat Maharaj recently told me that your interest in installation came about partly through your exposure to work you saw there. What attracted you in the form?

AK: It's not Documenta 11 and the installation as much as the experience then and after of interacting with its energy. An energy that inspires to explore human relationships and politics with as much freedom that one can imagine. The real meaning of Documenta 11 for me is a long discussion. The installation is always attractive because it allows another more tangible space for a multiplicity of experiences. In that way sometimes it seems closer to life. It is not more or less, or better or worse. It's another vocabulary. In essence we are still in the realm of images, sound, poetry and time and life of course.

RF: Your most recent work focuses on repression in Burma. What generated that shift and has it engendered different ways of working?

AK: I had friends who were lawyers and working with Burmese refugees/activists in exile in India. Over time I began to understand the meaning of the Burmese resistance and also made a few Burmese friends. At first I was quite shocked by my own ignorance about the democracy movement in Burma. Five decades of struggle, students sacrificing their lives over and over again. It was hard to understand this courage. I felt I needed to respond in any small way possible.

als inexplicably cut away to a city street at night, a pot, and a hanging cradle. A paddle dips into soft green ripples. A curtain billows to reveal the bare back of a longhaired man seated in a wooden doorway. As the film progresses, these tantalizing but enigmatic fragments find their context in the different geographical strands. With no narration or textual explication, intercutting among different locations and poets makes for surprisingly riveting cinema. This deceptively simple structural device brings forward — and commingles — the artists' passionate interventions on exploitation, caste, religious communalism and conflicts over national identity.

MA WIN MAW OO

One in a series of short videos against the military dictatorship in Burma, this tape memorializes Win Maw Oo, killed at the age of 13 while demonstrating against the regime in 1988. Known as the 8888 Uprising (began August 8, 1988), the protests

MA WIN MAW OO, 2005, 4 minutes

This resistance needed to be understood and respected. Also, I wanted to work outside the framework of the political boundaries of the Indian nation but still within the subcontinent. We need to respond and relate to the subcontinent as a region. This region will not look the same after 20 years. We have a commonality of interest, of cultures, that is stronger than lines on a map.

Further, I didn't want to construct a "human interest" story about this resistance and run around looking for funding, so I began to work on my own. To make a series of films, thoughts, image moments. Instead of rushing into Burma to understand it, I began to circle it, to move away in order to end up being close to it. I had no structure, no narrative, no client, no bleeding heart, no missionary misconceptions. This helped me make films in an open and free way and to explore many ways of understanding the Burmese resistance. Eventually, it resulted in *The Tom First Pages* — 19 projections as an installation and five single-channel films. This project enabled me to tangibly present an experience on film where we can witness the passage of multiple times in a single narrative so as to open up different forms of comprehension.

RF: These videos are more abstract than your works on India. Does this represent a more general shift away from documentary traditions towards a more experimental non-fiction approach?

AK: More abstract to see or to tell? Abstraction is multi-layered and can be expressed and experienced in many ways. There are all kinds of abstractions in earlier work, but maybe to answer your question specifically — I could say, in a way yes, but it's just what happened at the time, what seemed appropriate and emerged. I always resist the interpretation and the need for an interpretation that wishes to "conclude" specific directions or "shifts" or "leaving behind" or questions of tradition, etc. I don't really feel like I have left something to go towards something else. When you ride a bicycle sometimes you let go of the handlebars and ride, and sometimes you don't. Sometimes you even walk with the bike. I feel and do many things all the time.

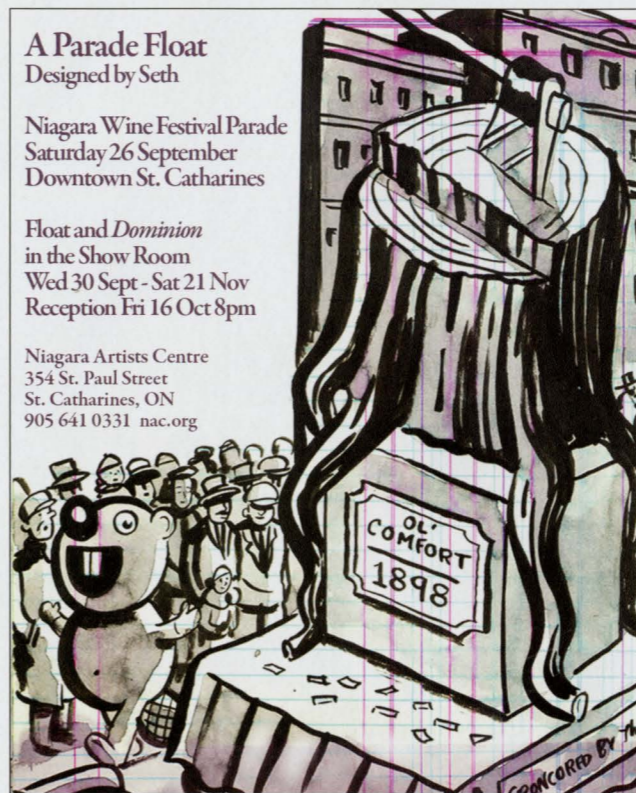
RICHARD FUNG is a video artist and writer, and an Associate Professor at the Ontario College of Art and Design. Over the winter of 2009 he was Visiting Professor at the James Beveridge Media Resource Centre, Mass Communication Research Centre, Jamia Millia Islamia in New Delhi.

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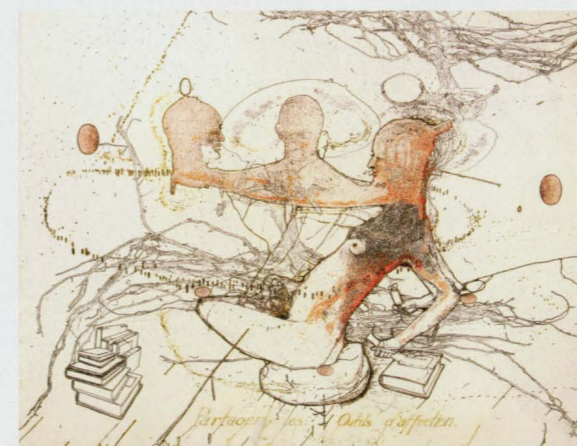
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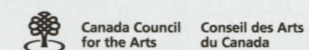
Group drawing exhibition organized by MSVU Art Gallery
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Massimo Guerrera, *Partager les outils d'affection* 1998-2008 (photo: Joyce Yahouda Gallery)

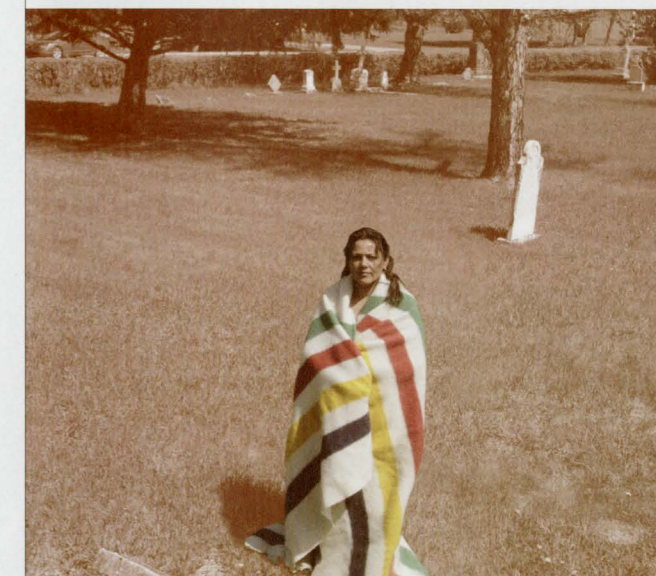
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united different sectors of Burmese society in a pro-democracy movement that pre-figured the mass demonstrations of 2007, similarly crushed by state violence.

The works in this series eschew the spoken word in favour of minimalist captions and meaning built through creative treatment of image and sound. In *Ma Win Maw Oo*, a silent video, pools of throbbing, saturated colour are slowly revealed, as the computer digitally zooms out, to be a still photograph of the dead child carried by two medical students. Kanwar breaks down the digital video image to its component technical elements, foregrounding the pixels and the pulsation that results when a freeze frame effect is applied to an interlaced signal. This conceit impacts head and heart simultaneously. It draws our attention to the materiality of the media of documentation — photography and video — so that we understand the picture as an artefact, a representation. Even so, this eerie movement that simulates, but is clearly not, life poignantly gestures to the child's beating heart stilled by brutality.

HENNINGSVAER

This short film, shot on the eponymous Norwegian cod fishing island in the Arctic Circle, is often described as a meditation on exile and the thin line between paradise and prison. The first half features beautifully composed long takes of the barren northern landscape. The ribs of a window frame, raindrops trickling down the pane and reflections of a lone figure in the glass assert the spatial difference between the interior viewpoint of the camera and the wild exterior. The lapping of waves, the bellowing of a ship's horn, and the gentle crackling of a fireplace emphasize the quiet and isolation of the foreign setting. But near the halfway point, the film echoes the opening shot of arrival on a boat, this time to an island in the subcontinent, a forested one of dull yellow and green instead of silver and grey. Is it memory and yearning, or does the film suggest that exile is not only a condition of far-off places but one that can also occur at home?

HENNINGSVAER, 2006, 15 minutes



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Liz Magor, detail, *Beckside*, 2007.



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Kenneth Goldsmith, Food Jammers,
Kelly Richardson and Tom Sherman

Fall In
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December 13, 2009

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Bélaïr Clément, Gillian Collyer, Zev
Farber, Alison S. M. Kobayashi, Ryan
Park, Roula Partheniou, Josh Schwebel
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Simone Jones, *Perfect Vehicle*, 2003 - 2006.
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FUTURE DIAGNOSTICS AT THE SHARJAH BIENNIAL 2009



Srimoyee Mitra

Mariam Ghani and Erin Ellen Kelly, *Smile, You're in Sharjah* (video still), 2009. Courtesy: the artists.

In recent years, the proliferation of the American rhetoric on the “war on terror” has translated into wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and been reinforced by the ongoing violence and conflict between Israel, Palestine and Lebanon. Mainstream media coverage has analyzed, sensationalized and fetishized these wars for the Western public, while governments have supplied their military forces.

Together, the government and the media have generated policies based on fear and suspicion, while words such as “terrorists,” “Islamic fundamentalists,” “security,” “illegal immigrant” and “anti-war protester” have entered daily conversations and further restricted the movement of a large majority of people. After a period of silence within the art world, issues concerning violence, anxiety, memory and displacement have become common themes in the major international Biennials. But do they foster a better understanding of the scale and complexity of recurring violence, loss and punitive laws against asylum seekers?

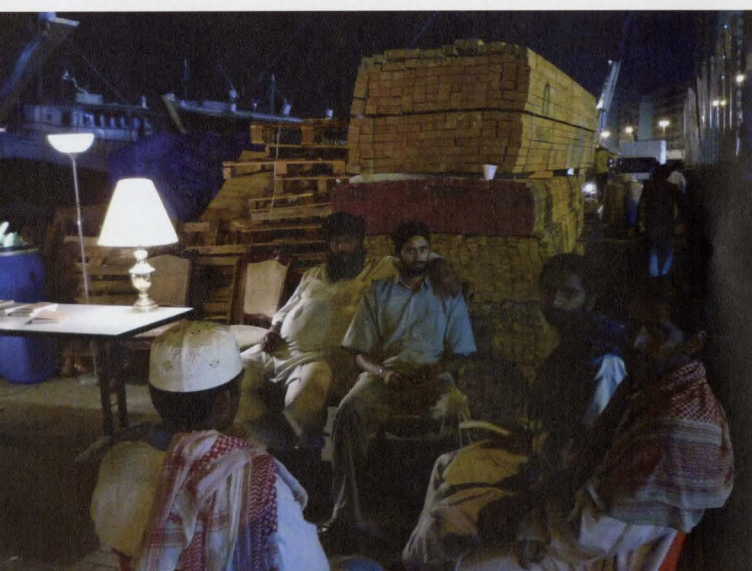
The 2009 Sharjah Biennial opened in the midst of a profound economic crisis, just months after the war on Gaza ended, offering the timely theme of *Provisions for the Future*. Located in the heart of the Middle East, the trauma of displacement, marginalization and fragmented histories has a palpable presence in the local environment of the Emirates, which has a population mainly comprised of migrant laborers and expatriate workers. In this context, the Biennial has the potential to play a crucial role in subverting the polemic discourses of terrorism and the Islamophobia perpetuated by the Western mainstream. My concern was whether the Biennial could serve as an international platform for mobilizing discussions on migration, movement and the status of workers to develop a deeper

understanding of contemporary experience in the Middle East and to examine the interconnectedness of contemporary societies in the 21st century. The works that succeeded in the Biennial transformed the passive viewing experience into a compelling and enlightening exercise of looking for new models and trying to find solutions.

One of the most successful works in the Biennial placed the process of reconciling trauma at the centre of moving forward. *3 Triptychs*, by Lebanese artist Lamia Joreige, engaged viewers in a sensory experience as they walked through a labyrinth of interconnected chambers that triggered a deep sense of loss and grief. Imagine a small dark room. You enter it alone and see a faint reflection of yourself on the opposite wall. As you walk towards the wall, it leads you to another room. You enter this room and it's even smaller; washed out projections of children, landscapes and war merge into one another on the wall. A hypnotic flow of images and familiar sounds draw you to the next room, where it is pitch dark. Strings of music accompany you as you feel your way into the following room where the projections of fragmented images continue. Walking through the labyrinth of spectral sounds and images feels like déjà vu. For Joreige, *3 Triptychs* is an exploration of memory, erasure, collective and fragmented histories and the aftermath of war. It is a powerful work that evokes complex feelings that blur the

boundaries between the viewer and the artwork, personal history and collective memory, self and other. The darkened rooms, echoing with sound, poignantly embody a trauma that can never be retold in words.

Joreige's message was particularly resonant in Sharjah, an oasis in the turbulent Middle East where the reiteration of violence and war has become routine. The Biennial took place in the Arts and Heritage district, comprised of the Sharjah Art Museum and its peripheral galleries: Shamsi House, Serkal House and the Collections building. The museum and arts district is located minutes from the vibrant Sharjah Creek, docked with colourful dhows (wooden sailing boats) and crowded with goods, labourers and migrant workers loading and unloading boats by hand and with small cranes. The creek is surrounded by rows of dry fruit sellers carrying different varieties of nuts and raisins, dates and chocolate, worked and run by migrants who are an essential part of the local economy.

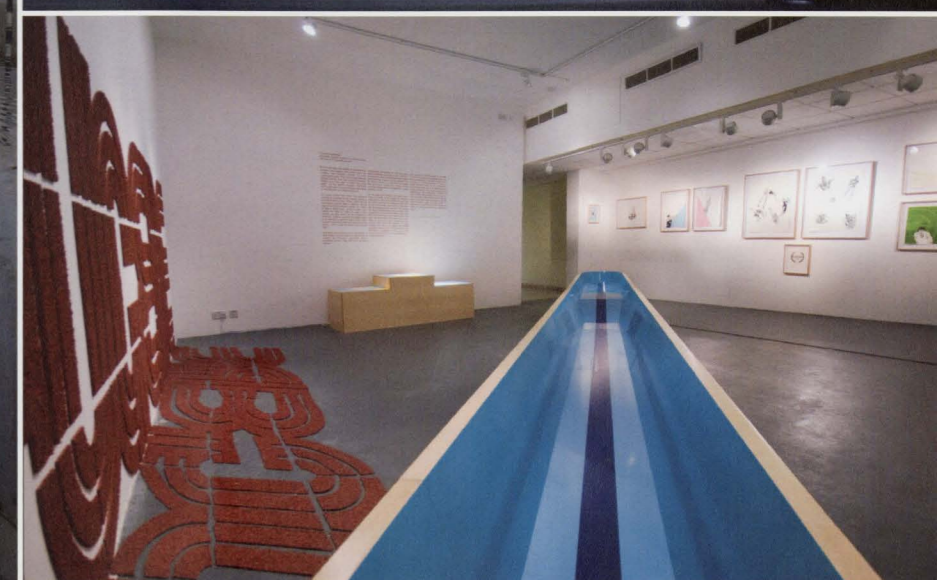


Every evening for the first three days of the Biennial, from 7pm to 10pm artists Shaina Anand and Ashok Sukumaran hosted a radio show on Radio Meena 100.3 FM, taking music requests and airing the comments and experiences of the sailors and dry fruit vendors who work in the area surrounding the museum. The artists played songs in all the regional languages of the South Asian countries from which the majority of the sailors and migrant workers in the neighbourhood originated. The radio show was part of a larger piece called *Wharfage*, a two-part project including a publication that was based on the booming dhow trade between Sharjah and Somalia in the wake of the financial crises and a series of radio-broadcasts from 18 – 21 March, 2009 initiated by CAMP, an artist collective based in Mumbai. This project was commissioned by curator Tarek Abou El Fetouh for the Biennial's performance and film screening program. The strength of *Wharfage* lay in the extensive research conducted by Anand, Sukumaran and Sanjay Bhangar on the lives of

the sailors and their trade routes. They did not romanticize the trade or dhow sailors — instead their meticulous documentation of the goods flowing between Sharjah and Somalia revealed the multidirectional influence and far-reaching impacts that do not end at the ports of these cities. It was a symbolic project to begin the Sharjah Biennial with, as it immediately contextualized the Biennial within the very local environment and created a forum for the labor force of Sharjah to present their views in the mainstream. Even though *Wharfage* wasn't part of the main exhibition it was awarded the main Jury Award at the 2009 Biennial.

Back in the museum, exhibition curator Isabel Carlos outlined her curatorial concept as examining the future through “newly merging economic and cultural conceptions” in Sharjah, a city she described as the “meeting point” of many cultures and worlds. A key goal according to Carlos, was to generate and develop a critical discourse around the contemporary culture in Sharjah and the Middle East through the Biennial. As a result, more than half of the 68 international artists Carlos showcased were from Middle Eastern backgrounds. The video *Smile You Are in Sharjah*, by Mariam Ghani and Erin Ellen Kelly, documented the movement and rhythms of the city's public spaces in contrast to the ostentatious and banal tourist attractions that are foregrounded by government. In *We Began by Measuring the Distance*, Palestinian-American artist Basma Al-Sharif combined fragmented footage from news channels and found recordings with her own footage shot in Chicago, Cairo and Gaza to examine the media's portrayal of war. Egyptian artist Hala Elkoussy transformed her gallery into an archive brimming with framed portraits of children in school, men and women in military uniforms, books, musty fabrics and videos to document the scale of socio-economic change, upheaval and economic disparity in contemporary Egypt — all in the name of economic progress — in *Of Red Nails, Palm Trees and Other Icons*. New York-based Nida Sinnokrot developed an impressive installation that transposed the raised armed symbol of an ancient Egyptian belief system into a contemporary sculpture of mechanical bulldozer arms, creating a physical and metaphysical allegory of power. These examples portray the multiplicity of themes and references to Sharjah that the artists engaged in. Yet, spread out within the linear sequence of galleries of the Sharjah Art Museum they risked reiterating stereotypes and assumptions of the Middle East based on war, victimhood, wealth, censorship and endless construction.

More successful works engaged with cross-cultural dialogues and transcended the spatial limitations of the galleries, interrupting the lackadaisical movement of the audience and sometimes even contesting it. For instance, Danish artist Nikolaj Bendix Skyum Larsen placed the viewer in the centre of two video portraits projected on opposite walls of a dark room. In *Rendezvous*, Larsen examined migration patterns from the southern Indian state of Kerala to Sharjah, where young men from small towns work as temporary, daily wage laborers. Through video portraits, Larsen connected



<clockwise from left> Sheela Gowda. *Drip Field*, 2009; Nikolaj B.S. Larsen. Installation view of *Rendezvous*, 2009; Haig Aivazian. Installation view of *FUGURE*, 2009. All photos: Plamen Galabov. Courtesy: the Sharjah Biennial. <opposite page> The port at Sharjah creek during the *Wharfage* radio broadcast event. Courtesy: CAMP.

the migrant workers with their families in Kerala, and the distance between the screens encapsulated the complexities of belonging and displacement that are perpetuated by the vicious cycles of globalization and migration. Indian artist Sheela Gowda's bizarre, resonant and rhythmic soundscape and industrial installation *Drip Field* was inspired by the well-established drip irrigation system in Sharjah. This installation amplified, mixed and projected the sounds of water droplets to offer a poignant critique of wasteful models of development on which our economies are based. Haig Aivazian developed a one-lane swimming pool for his mixed media installation *Fugure (A Series of Olympiadic Moments)*. Built to the precise dimensions of an Olympic lane, it looked overgrown and out of place in the small gallery. Spanish-conceptual artist Maider López took this further by completely rejecting the gallery space within the museum. Instead her construction of *Walls* mimicked the construction of the galleries along the corridors. Polish artist Agnes Janich transformed her gallery into a claustrophobic maze that reminded viewers of the disorientation that accompanies fear and violence, echoing the surreal experience in Joreige's *3 Triptychs*. The quiet works highlighted the need to reconcile, mourn and remember the trauma of the past while envisioning the future, resonating loudly in the Biennial.

The Sharjah Biennial 2009 was most successful in showcasing the wide range of artistic practices that in one way or another attempted a connection with social and political reality in Sharjah and the Middle East. Altogether the Biennial did confront the many social, political and economic factors that determine fraught labour laws, traumatic recurrences of violence and destabilized routes of movement. With regard to finding *Provisions for the Future*, Carlos succeeded moderately, as the nature and caliber of the works varied along with their capacity to examine the issues at stake and the complexities that arise in “meeting points” of different cultures. All of this raises the question of whether national biennials offer an open space for generating a critical discourse on socially and politically engaged work or whether they perpetuate assumptions on cultural difference with the glossy (re)packaging of contemporary art.

SRIMOYEE MITRA is an emerging writer, curator and performance artist. She has worked as the Art Writer for publications in India including *Time Out Mumbai* and *Art India – The Art News Magazine of India*. She is currently the Programming Coordinator at South Asian Visual Arts Centre (SAVAC), Toronto.

CREATIVITY OR CRISIS

MAPPING THE RUST BELT

- Number of manufacturing jobs lost in Ontario from May 2008 to May 2009: 138,000
- Number of jobs lost per hour in the U.S. in June 2009: 649
- Percentage of General Motors owned by the United Auto Workers' benefit trust: 17.5
- Percentage of GM owned by the U.S. government: 60
- Number of GM plants to close in the U.S. as a result of the corporation's bankruptcy filing: 14
- Date on which the Creative Cities Summit 2.0 began in Detroit: 10/13/08
- Chance that a household in Detroit was foreclosed during 2008: 1 in 22
- Percentage of mortgages in 2007 held by African Americans in Michigan that were subprime: 52
- Percentage held by whites that were subprime: 19
- Number of days each week that the *Detroit Free Press* is no longer delivered to homes: 4
- Slogan of the Michigan State Housing Development Authority: 'Save the Dream'
- Average income of a resident of Canada in 2007: \$40,237
- Average income of Canada's 100 highest-paid CEOs in 2007: \$10,408,054
- Average arts-related income of a visual artist in Canada in 2007: \$15,026
- Number of the nine cities in Northern Ontario that have declined in population since 1996: 9
- Number of these cities mentioned in the 2009 Martin Prosperity Institute report *Ontario in the Creative Age*: 0
- Number of times the 36-page report mentions Toronto: 17
- Estimated ratio of the suicide rates of unemployed to employed individuals: 3:1
- Percentage change in the number of welfare recipients in Leamington, Ontario from May 2008 to May 2009: +233
- Percentage in May 2009 of unemployed Ontarians not eligible for welfare: 59
- Total amount granted by the government of Ontario to Luminato, an annual arts festival held in Toronto: \$36,500,000
- Minimum number of major financial institutions that have sponsored Luminato since 2006: 5
- Minimum number of independent theatres in Toronto that have closed during that time due to funding cuts: 4
- Amount spent on corrections for every dollar spent on post-secondary education in the U.S. in 1987: \$0.32
- Amount spent per dollar in 2007: \$0.60
- Number of states, including Michigan, that spend more on corrections than post-secondary education: 5
- Median annual income of a U.S. male full-time worker aged 25–34 in 1980: \$43,700
In 2006: \$37,000
- Average debt of an undergraduate student in Canada who graduated in 2006: \$24,000
- Projected cost in 2010–11 of Ontario's recently announced 2% increase in social assistance benefits: \$100,000,000
- Projected cost in 2010–11 of Ontario's recently announced corporate income tax cuts: \$530,000,000
- Number of times the phrase 'greedy union' or 'powerful union' has appeared in the *National Post* since 1998: 114
- Number of workdays lost to labour disputes in Canada in 1980: 9,129,880
- Number lost in 2008: 795,029
- Women's average income as a percentage of men's average income in Canada in 1995 and 2005, respectively: 70.9, 70.6

Sources: American Association of Suicidology; Art Gallery of York University; *BusinessWeek*; Canadian Artists' Representation; CBC News; *Maclean's*; Michigan State Housing Development Authority; National Center for Education Statistics; *National Post*; National Post-Secondary Student Aid Study; *New York Times*; Pew Charitable Trusts; Statistics Canada; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

1. Toronto, ON In 2007, the University of Toronto and the province of Ontario enticed Richard Florida, captain of the creative class, to assume the directorship of the provincially funded, \$100-million Martin Prosperity Institute. After his arrival, Florida was fêted at a dinner hosted by mayor David Miller, was described as the heir to Jane Jacobs, and began writing a regular column in the *Globe and Mail*. He is granted extensive access to Toronto City Hall and the Ontario Legislature. Florida has lauded the virtues of his new city—a fast-growing megalopolis hospitable to the language of creativity, tolerance, and growth—going so far as to herald the emergence of a 'Toronto school of urbanism.' The place-making strategies born here are exported to cities with markedly different and challenges.

2. Windsor, ON When 1,400 struck for 101 days this summer in defence the feared piles of trash never appeared. was taking the city workers' place. Windsor over the past decade and many of the to eke out an existence through an including, since the beginning of the is promising that a new development will 'attract professionals, individuals, and pride.' In an effort to stimulate private investment—urban tourist attractions—the city of Windsor plans to dig a \$50-million to be filled with municipal water, is being pitched by its boosters as the of this riverside city's waterfront.

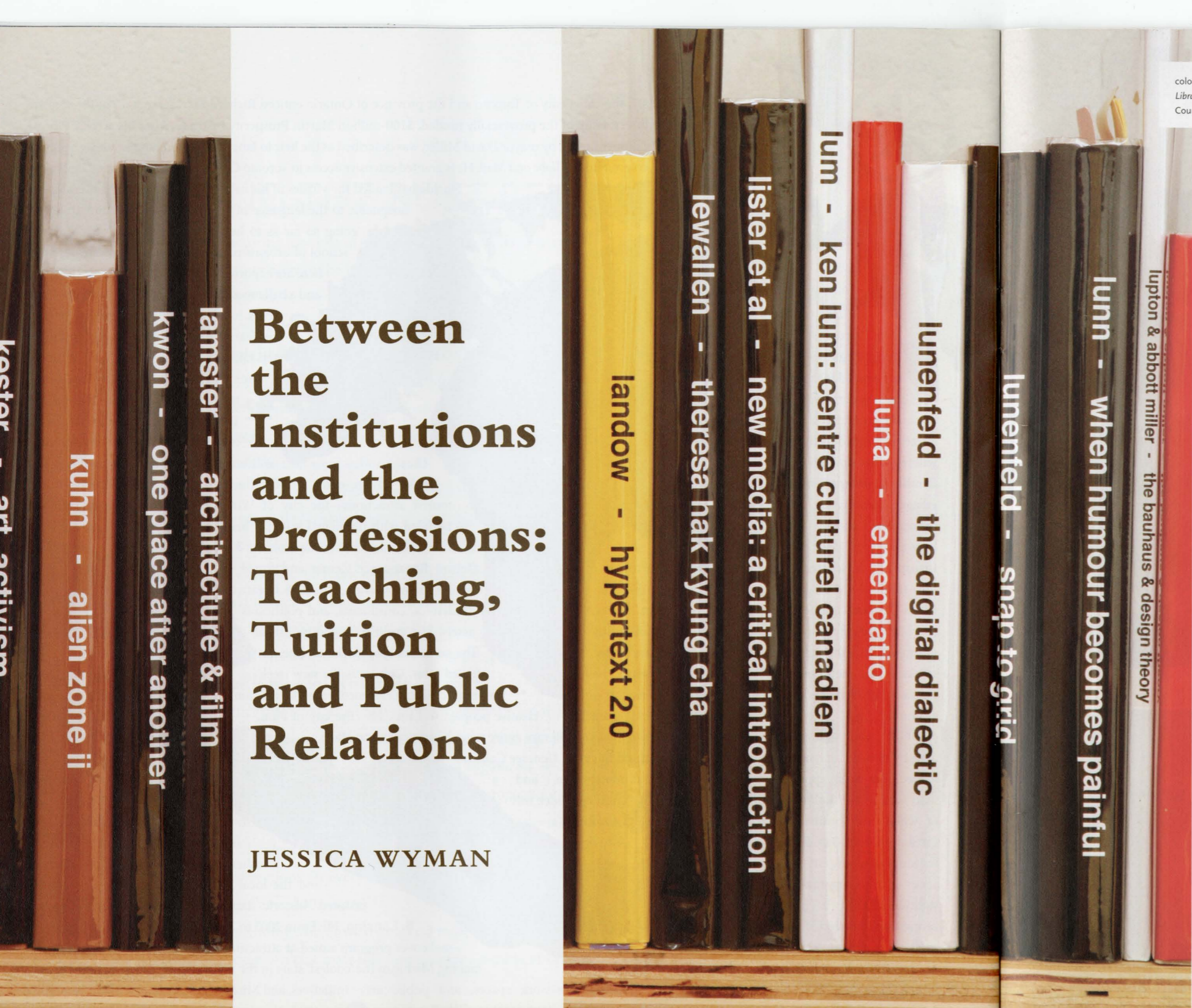
3. Detroit, MI Detroit Renaissance Center and timed as by the financial crisis, the 2008 Creative academics, consultants, and politicians assets. The event reframed industrial The summit's blog declared, 'the gas cleared a bit. Culture is the new steel.' Workshops and cultivate openness, and plan birth place to shrink its land treasurer, Dan group of charities take aim at 50 cities, most Rust Belt, including Detroit, is bulldozed from Flint's memory, is ushered in. 'What's Up Downtown', a and the local reinvestment corporation, entices restored historic buildings, renovated entertainment

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5. Lansing, MI From 2003 to 2006, the state of Michigan invested makeover program aimed at attracting 'urban pioneers', revamping each making Michigan the 'coolest' state in the nation. Cool Cities provided grants to sow 'happening' neighbourhoods with farmers' markets, live-work spaces, and public art initiatives, and Michigan's refashioned towns were sold to young people employed in art, design, and engineering.

6. Youngstown, OH Beginning in 1977, Youngstown witnessed the closings of five major steel mills, resulting in the loss of 50,000 jobs and \$1.3 billion annually in manufacturing wages. In 1983, the unemployment rate reached 24.9%; as residents left in search of work, the city's population shrank drastically. Over the decades, the city has pursued a variety of development schemes from courting the prison industry, to heritage tourism, to enticing transnational corporations with corporate subsidies. Most recently, it developed Youngstown 2010, a plan to shrink its residential neighbourhoods by 30%. The plan targets low-income districts that have been extensively abandoned, replacing them with parkland and 'green industrial zones'. It promises to create a 'new regional economy' that positions Youngstown 'to become a competitive city once again.' The plan is consistent with the city's long history of favouring the interests of business and industry over those of its residents.

7. Pittsburgh, PA Long a base for corporations, medical research, and universities, journalists and public officials have rediscovered Pittsburgh as a successful shift from an industrial to a knowledge-based economy. These pundits wilfully ignore that there are two Pittsburghs: the city and its elite suburbs are home to oncologists and nuclear engineers, while nearby steel towns teeter on the edge of abandonment. Towns like Braddock and McKeesport face unemployment and poverty, crumbling infrastructure and public services, and an aging and increasingly vulnerable population. African Americans continue to experience segregation and stark disparities in health, income, housing, and education. The elite who market the city's 'revitalization' are also its sole beneficiaries.



colourschool at UBC, colourschool
Library, 2006-2007. Photo: Lauren Scott.
Courtesy: Kristina Lee Podesva.

Between the Institutions and the Professions: Teaching, Tuition and Public Relations

JESSICA WYMAN

“Institutions are by nature designed to compete — for students, for resources, for reputations. This turns every public conversation about the education of the artist in Canada into an opportunity for marketing or a plea for greater government support. Not surprisingly, schools are invested in what gets money in their pockets and bums in their seats. And success, under this model of marketing and market relevancy, has the nasty habit of breeding clones. So it is little wonder that there is such a significant degree of uniformity in the post-secondary system — be it in curriculum or in opinions coming from the conference hall.”

—Kissick, *Canadian Art* 72

The late 2008 issues of both *Canadian Art* and *C* magazines took up a subject recently much discussed among those in the fields of contemporary art: art schools and art education. With all the recent hype about the role of higher education in the visual arts, these issues — launched within weeks of one another — seemed to talk at cross-purposes about the matters at hand. While the writers in *C* primarily undertook a discursive approach to the intersections of art practices and the institutions that advance them (including magazines themselves), *Canadian Art*'s contributors took a much more boosterish approach, reading more like a series of press releases than a serious reflection on the state of training in art practice.

As a critic and historian very much embedded in the academic sector, I am well aware of the ways in which institutions need to work to develop profile and reputation (these are not always coextensive) in order to attract students, faculty and critical regard. When student enrolment numbers are so determinate of funding dollars and the reputation of universities depends heavily on the profile and success of its graduates and faculty, we in the arts sectors would do well to think deeply and critically about the ways in which institutional authority often serves less to challenge than to affirm conventionally understood notions of attainment.

In this respect, *Canadian Art*'s issue perhaps reflects to a greater extent what is more publicly and superficially addressed in discussion of Canada's art schools: their respective locations, faculty and student cohorts, the degrees that they confer and the histories that they advance and/or rewrite during recruitment and institutional shifts of power. Deborah Campbell's article on the reinvigoration of painting at Emily Carr University of Art and Design, for example, offers this as a practice explicitly in contravention of Vancouver's reputation as a centre for photoconceptualist practice. While this reputation is certainly in need of interrogation, her text mentions none of

the practices other than painting that are taught at ECU, simply substituting one art form for another as the centre of the city and institution's practice. Likewise, Gary Michael Dault's interview with Gerald Ferguson starts out with Ferguson's promise to “not, under any circumstances, talk about the good, golden days of NSCAD's past” (83). This mythic period, briefly acknowledged as such on the way to furthering that very same mythology, has been, it seems, both its burden and one of the chief selling points of NSCAD University.

When student enrolment numbers are so determinate of funding dollars and the reputation of universities depends heavily on the profile and success of its graduates and faculty, we in the arts sectors would do well to think deeply and critically about the ways in which institutional authority often serves less to challenge than to affirm conventionally understood notions of attainment.

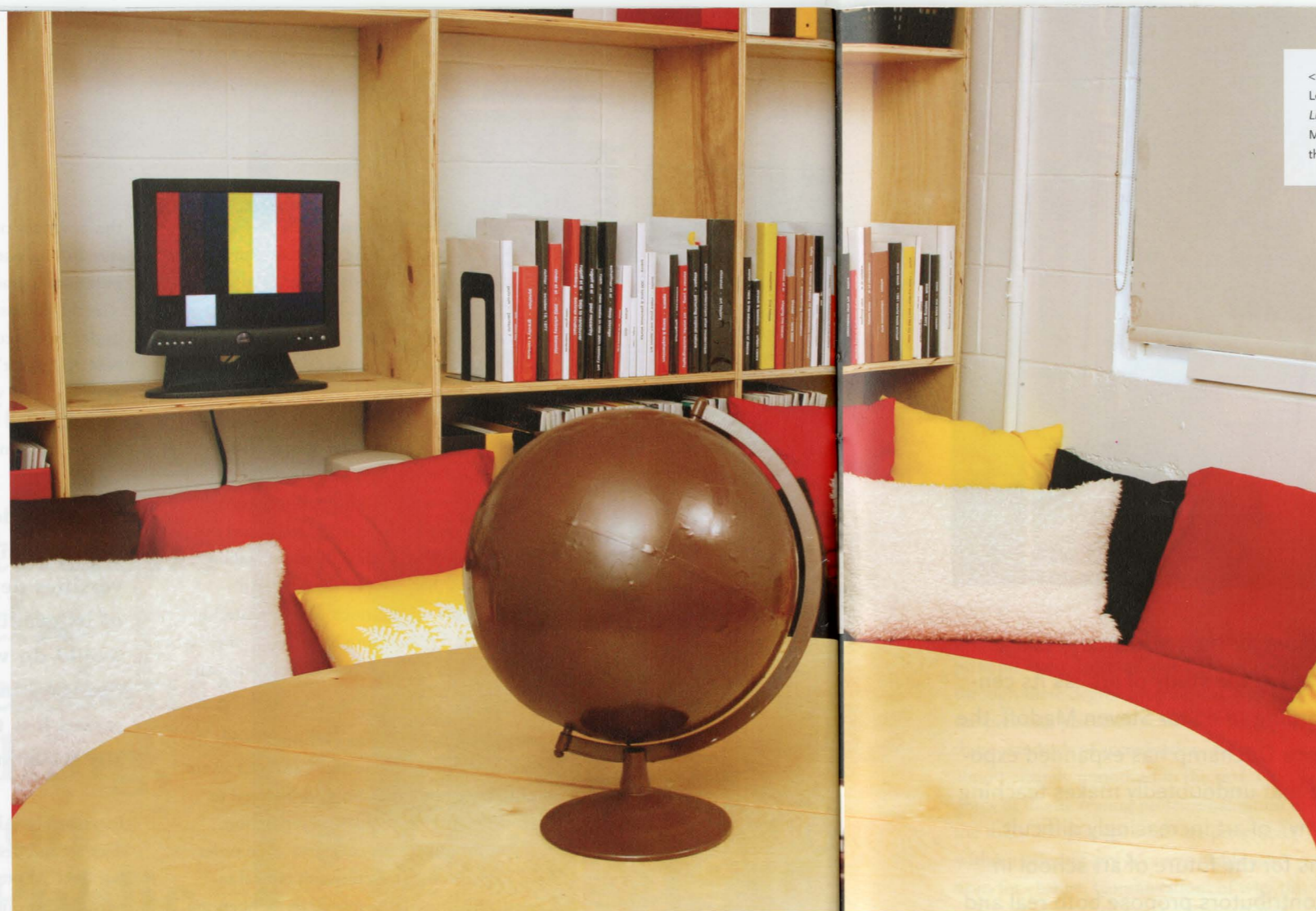
Inexplicably, Alberta College of Art and Design is the only independent art and design school not profiled in the issue of *Canadian Art*; but if ACAD would have been given the same treatment as OCAD, perhaps that omission should be counted as a blessing. Noah Richler's extensive and rhapsodic quoting of Richard Florida alongside almost equally heavy referencing of Ontario College of Art and Design president Sara Diamond reads more like a marketing profile for an in-flight magazine than it does an art magazine treatment.

Perhaps the most deeply critical text in the issue is John Kissick's article “Elephants in the Room: the Looming Issues in Art Education.” In that text, Kissick problematizes many aspects of post-secondary education in art, including the sacrality of the portfolio interview for admission and the current mania for the development of PhD programs in studio art. A university administrator as well as an artist, Kissick is hardly advocating for the dismantling of higher education in art and its related fields; but his willingness to engage these matters critically and reflexively is both provocative and refreshing in an issue where so much of the writing assumes the appropriateness and incontrovertibility of the institution's role as positive, productive and altruistic — a characterization that many who inhabit the nation's institutions of art education and credentialization, on whatever side of the easel, may loathe to support.

C Magazine's articles, on the whole, explore more issue-based considerations of pedagogy, exhibition practice, curatorial education and the role of criticism today. The themes of professionalization and credentialism are treated more ruminatively here, looking less at institutions as loci of practice and authority than at artist-generated practice, in part as a way of filling some of the gaps in institutionally mandated art education.

Kristina Lee Podesva's pedagogical project *colourschool*, mentioned in Leah Sandals's roundup of ten recent MFA graduates in *Canadian Art*, is here given stand-alone treatment by Michael Birchall as an exemplar of the trend toward participatory art practice. *colourschool*, he writes, "parallels the institutions of art and the academy, [critiquing] both, while simultaneously recognizing the value they retain by being open to critique" (15). Locating *colourschool* within the larger scope of laboratory and classroom-type environments in which participation is voluntary and so decidedly not part of formal education and training — a model of heuristic agency that seems, at least in part, to fill in for what formal institutions routinely do not provide — Birchall suggests that a new theoretical framework is needed for this "new-genre public art." What remains elusive, however, is the notion that such practices as Podesva's which critique larger institutional structures and models of learning can and should themselves be subject to critique; Birchall, like Nicolas Bourriaud before him, seems to assume that the ideally convivial and democratic nature of such work is inherently positive and open. Content, here, is treated very much as beside the point.

In his essay on the "learning exhibition," Gregory Elgstrand proposes the use of episodic structures, elements of time, play, reflection and improvisation (among others) to reveal as much as to work within institutional structures. Engaging with the histories and debates that have been inscribed through institutional authority is clearly one of Elgstrand's desires, and is to be lauded; it also presumes — or, perhaps, hopes — that a dialogue with the *longue durée* of institutional history is something many curators and artists want, rather than the burden of research and indebtedness that many consider it to be. This is worth noting explicitly since there seems to be an unstated desire inscribed in many texts, exhibitions, and in both of these magazine issues, to break with the pasts of art practice and institutional reification at the same time as making use, often unproblematically, of the advantages that they offer. While Elgstrand is scrupulous in referencing previous exhibitions that reveal the physical and intellectual armature of exhibition



<top> colourschool at UBC. Photo: Lauren Scott. Courtesy: Kristina Lee Podesva. <bottom left> colourschool at Emily Carr. Brown Bag Lunch Discussion with Sabine Bitter, Helmut Weber, and Stefan Römer, Mar 7, 2008. Courtesy: Kristina Lee Podesva. <bottom right> Inside the Ontario College of Art and Design. Photo: Richard Johnson.

structures, a blithe disregard for such histories seems to underlie many calls for reinvention of exhibitionary structures, acting as though no one has ever wrestled before with the structures that both constrict and enable art practices.

A facet of this very frustration bubbles from sections of Gabrielle Moser's meditation on the proliferation of graduate programs in curatorial studies. The tension between desire for knowledge, submission to the strictures of formal education, and skepticism about the nature of knowledge, education and skills training is understandably present throughout Moser's discussion of the changing role of the curator in contemporary art practice. Mindful and critical of the rhetoric of the creative class and the mindless valorization of "creative work" that comes along with it, Moser notes that there is, and likely always will be, a gap between "purists [who call for] a messy, slow crawling toward the profession," earning credentials "by doing, not by attending school" (27) and those who believe that there is tremendous value to be gained by professional certification. It is fitting to be dubious about what it is that such programs claim to do, especially when the current definitions of curation are so varied and slippery.

If one doesn't need a degree in art to be an artist, or a degree in curating to be a curator, then how is it we find ourselves in a moment of hyper-institutionalization in which those qualifications of which we are so dubious take on so much value to us?

Just as varied and slippery is the role of published writing about art, addressed by Earl Miller in a rather elegiac essay on the fading relevance of the art critic. While Miller mourns the loss of art criticism's influence, he also notes the near-impossibility of a life primarily dedicated to the production of this widely produced but infrequently read form. Citing, among others, James Elkins, who has written cogently about the strange state of art criticism as a profession with no disciplinary history and no generally accepted standards or goals, Miller writes about the current state of criticism vis-à-vis the former state of high canonical art criticism, notably the heyday of October. This longing for a renewed commitment to criticism usefully declares the need for writers to improve their craft, for publications to pay more and for readers to read more (and more broadly). But it also seems a lament for a time that never really was, one that is largely out of step with so many contemporary modes of making and dissemination.

What underlies not just this supposed crisis of criticism but also the discomfiture around curatorial entitlement, pedagogy and intentionality is exactly the struggle of other contemporary institutions: if one doesn't need a degree in art to be an artist, or a degree in curating to be a curator, then how is it that we find ourselves in a moment of hyper-institutionalization in which those qualifications of which we are dubious take on so much value to us? We carp about them, about the ways in which they mean so little, precisely because they have come to mean so much. It is a reality, albeit an ironic one, that in such a highly individualistic age as ours, institutions and disciplines are as constitutive of identity as they have ever been, perhaps even more so. We would do better to acknowledge and critique them than to simply maintain their normalization by failing to acknowledge their power to assimilate and reify.

JESSICA WYMAN teaches in the Faculty of Liberal Studies, Ontario College of Art and Design, and is Curator in Residence at the McIntosh Gallery, University of Western Ontario through fall 2009. She is also a Contributing Editor to *Fuse*.

I WISH SOMEONE HAD WARNED ME: *Art School (Propositions for the 21st Century)*

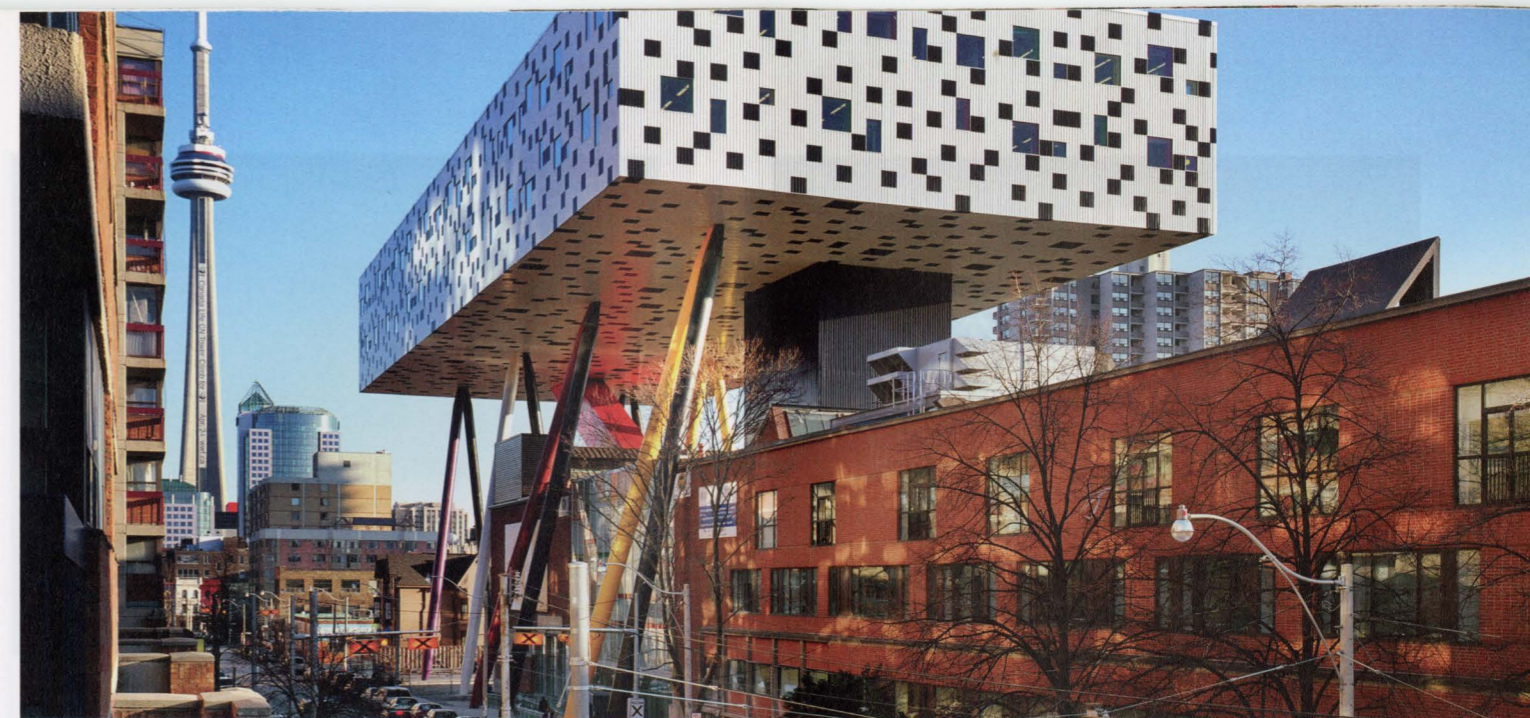
edited by Steven Henry Madoff • MIT Press, October 2009 REVIEW BY Amber Landgraff

ART SCHOOL (PROPOSITIONS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY)

edited by Steven Henry Madoff

Art School (Propositions for the 21st Century) takes “what it means to teach the study of art” as its central question. According to editor Steven Madoff, the definition of art since Duchamp has expanded exponentially, a change that undoubtedly makes teaching the “what” and “why” of art increasingly difficult. Considering visions for the future of art school in the 21st century, contributors propose both real and theoretical examples of “schools,” including explorations of exhibitions as education, artist residencies and university programs. Featuring essays and interviews by notable figures — among them John Baldessari, Hans Haacke, Robert Storr, Ute Meta Bauer, and Marina Abramovic — many of the essays in the text are dubious as to whether or not it is possible to teach art at all. There seems to be a bitterness towards the rapid increase of MFA and PhD programs, due in part to an insistence that these programs are incapable of preparing an artist for the world and perhaps, most importantly, should never have been expected or designed to do so. As Michael Craig-Martin writes, the problem lies with a proliferation of young accredited students lacking practical experience: “Now what’s going to happen is we’re going to end up with schools that are entirely run by people with PhDs, who have no experience of the art world at all. It could not be a worse situation.” Yet, as an emerging artist/curator currently enrolled in one of these many new MFA programs, I have found myself facing the complicated reality that it is increasingly difficult to gain real experience without at least an MFA, and worse, that pursuing an MFA as a “young” artist tends to create its own kind of barriers. This attitude leaves me wondering what it is I am supposed to be accomplishing by being in school.

The conclusion of many contributors to this book is that new directions for art education should be focused outside of the degree



granting school system. But what it is that prompts many artists to seek out credentials through these degree programs, as well as the pressures placed on schools to reach those standards of accreditation, passes almost entirely unnoticed in the text. Criticisms of the increasing professionalization of the study and practice of art are presented without offering any concrete viable solutions for change. Considerations of why this move towards professionalization may have occurred in the first place or why a return to past models of practice is no longer feasible in the current market are also for the most part missing. Instead, what is presented seems to be nostalgia for a bygone era where young artists learned by simply “doing it,” with little to no schooling involved. While it is repeatedly pointed out that attending art school is no guarantee of employment, many of the essays bemoan the fact that young artists are actually being exposed to the art market while in school, where a shared thesis seems to be that artists should choose to study art for reasons of creative genius rather than a desire for job prospects in the future, despite the large debt that many students accrue by attending art school. A problematic position considering that we all have to work.

This isn’t to imply that there aren’t some interesting discussions offered in the text. The Raqs Media Collective eloquently tackle some of the more difficult realities associated with being an artist in the essay “How to be an Artist by Night.” They

discuss the precarious working conditions that many artists are faced with after graduation, often finding themselves working jobs during the day in order to finance being an artist by night. Daniel Birnbaum has written a conversation between “He” and “I” in “Teaching Art: Adorno and the Devil” where he takes on the position of the devil’s advocate in the debate over the usefulness of

“Art School” was actually quite far from the reality of attending an MFA program. With statements like “there will be enormous and amazing kitchens. In the manner of pre-schools, there will be reading lofts and soft places to rest. There will be a dacha nearby where one can eat and drink,” and “the artist Rirkrit Tiravanija transformed the school for a few days into an inn, a *gasthof*,

As Michael Craig-Martin writes, the problem lies with a proliferation of young accredited students lacking practical experience: Now what’s going to happen is we’re going to end up with schools that are entirely run by people with PhDs, who have no experience of the art world at all. It could not be a worse situation.

art school. In “Nobody Asked You To Do Nothing/A Potential School,” Liam Gillick and students paint a picture of an ideal art school, which includes among other things an increase in bicycles, sheds, saunas, kitchens, and soft places to rest. As well, practicing artists — including Fred Wilson, Mike Kelley, Guillermo Kuitca, Shirin Neshat and Paul Chan — were each given a questionnaire asking them to consider the benefits of their chosen educational path, traditional or not. Ken Lum finishes off the text with a letter detailing why he considers teaching to be important, despite how he feels about the art world at large, in “Dear Steven.”

All in all, I am left feeling like I wish that someone had warned me that the idealized picture that much of this text presents as

where students and guests slept, cooked, and hung out, talking about social issues, art making, and undoubtedly much more.” I was certainly lead to believe that there would be many more opportunities for eating and drinking at the very least. I suppose I feel a bit misled to find out that the reality of my education is turning out to be more school than art.

Amber Landgraff is an MFA student at the Ontario College of Art and Design’s Criticism and Curatorial Practices program. Her work focuses on performative gestures, public interventions and an exploration of collaboration and the “problem” of community.



GALLERY

critical art + culture

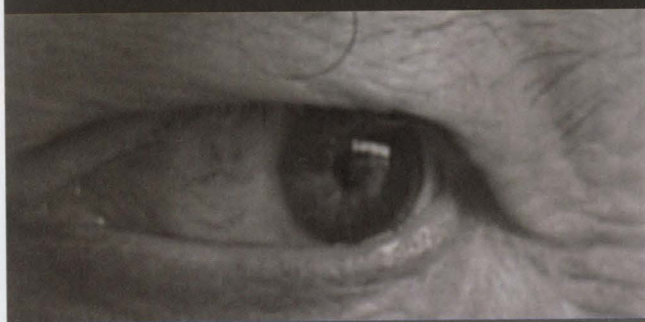
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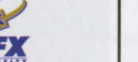
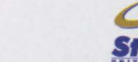
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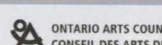
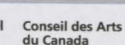
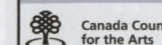
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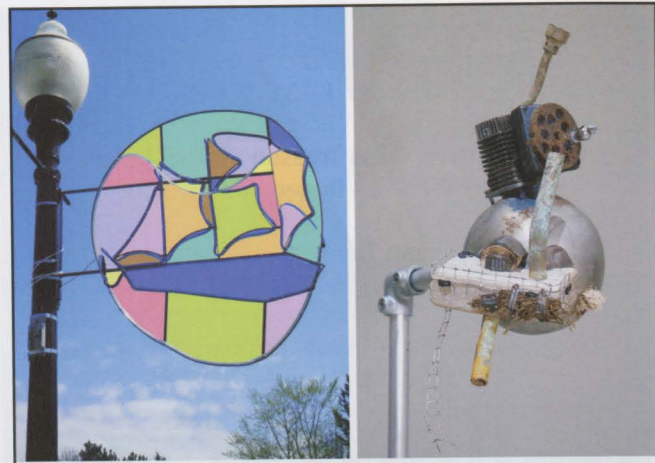
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LEFT: ANDREW HARWOOD, SAILOR, 2009.
 RIGHT: MICHAEL CAMPBELL, THE REDWOOD JASON BEKK, 2008.



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 Marilee Salvator
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December 3 - 19
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Image: Jimin Lee, *At Dusk*, Photo etching, Spilt bite, Pigment on Kozo, China collé, 15 x 24", 2009.
 Courtesy of the artist.

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MOVING FORWARD LOOKING BACK: Transforming Motion

The New Gallery
 15 May – 20 June, 2009

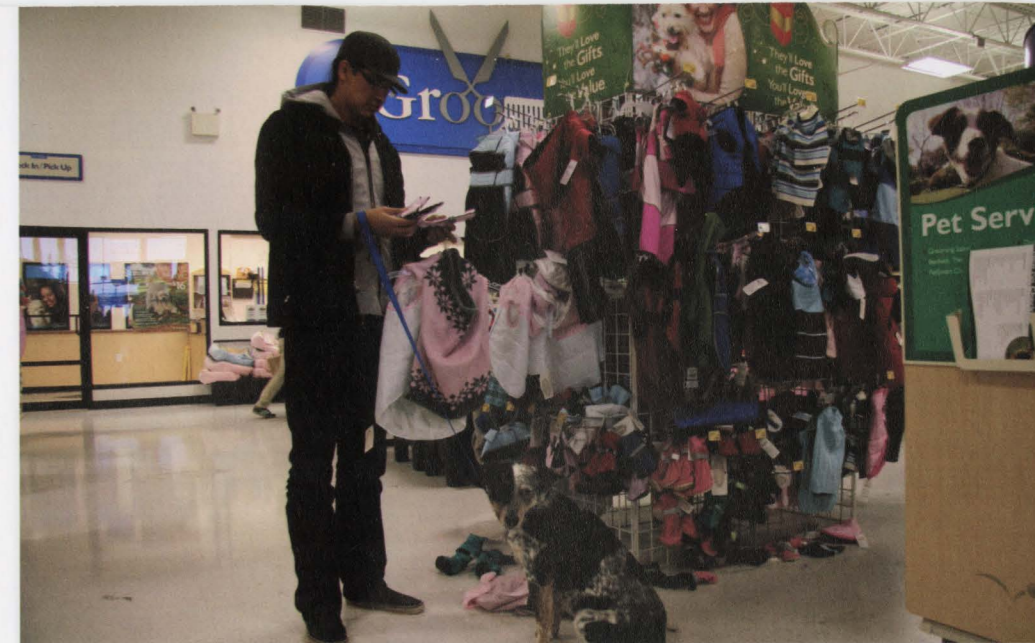
CURATED BY Terrance Houle

REVIEW BY Tammy McGrath

In *Transforming Motion*, Terrance Houle considers the present day conditions for a nomadic way of life through the work of three emerging First Nations/Native American artists — Duane Linklater, Nadya Kwandibens and Larry Blackhorse Lowe. All three of the artists consider the challenges and advantages of nomadic movement between urban and rural settings in search of employment and new opportunities while maintaining ties to one's own history and culture. The exhibition is particularly relevant in Calgary, a city that is attracting people from across the country for employment in the oil industry.

Upon entering the gallery, the first work I encounter is a two-channel video that documents a performance by Duane Linklater titled *Rezdog*. I smile as I watch the first monitor because I recognize the familiar actions of putting on road tunes and settling in of both artist and curator as they prepare for a road trip; they both get comfortable in the vehicle and begin to drive. They pass a sign that says "Blood Indian Reserve No Trespassing." A trading post and farm equipment slide in and out of view while prairie vistas and pickup trucks pass by. Eventually, they stop to visit a dog in a rural reservation setting; through the headphones the viewer hears a male voice talk about how the dog may be part dingo and part border collie. The animal looks happy and comfortable in its environment.

The second monitor shows the same dog being carried into the car and driven into the city; the dog does not want to go. The animal looks progressively less happy as it is



Duane Linklater. *Rezdog*, 2009. Photo: Terrance Houle. Courtesy: the artist and Terrance Houle.

leashed and brought into Urban Dog Market, a store filled with expensive treats and dog clothing. A woman's enthusiastic voice speaks about people going to Starbucks for their human treats then coming to her store to get their dog treats. The transition of the dog from its rural environment to the city is uncomfortable to watch, and a clear reflection of the difficulties of maintaining fluid nomadic lifestyles. Linklater's work is further contextualized by the location of the New Gallery in Eau Claire Market, a struggling mall that was once positioned as Calgary's Granville Island.

Across from Linklater's work is a projection of Larry Blackhorse Lowe's film, *June*, which depicts a young girl named June studying her Navajo language. I watch as this confident child learns to write and gives the viewer instruction on the different elements of a medicine wheel. As she leaves the room, the footage shifts to a scene from a hallway in the school and the color turns to black and white while a soundtrack begins to play. There is something eerie and disjointed about this segment. We no longer see June animated and engaged with the viewer, instead feeling the ominous undertones of her situation and conjuring the history of residential schools. The shot then changes pace as the viewer gets a glimpse of the child outside, followed by a domestic setting of warmth and family life inside the home. The young girl helps her grandmother by setting the table and learns how to make a teepee using her hands and some string. She is learning her Navajo heritage at school and at home — an experience that is much differ-

ent than that of her grandmother's generation. June will have a strong sense of belonging before she has to make her own way in the world, allowing her to adapt while still maintaining pride in who she is and where she has come from.

This question of belonging is also taken up by Nadya Kwandibens' series of photographs titled, *Concrete Indians*. The first image portrays an aboriginal man wearing a head-dress and jeans, sitting on steps in front of an urban landscape of architecture and people. He looks confidently and directly back at the viewer in much the same way as the female Pow-wow dancer in the second photo does. The third photo is different from the previous two; in this image, a woman dressed in a traditional beaded aboriginal dress walks barefoot across the street. She does not look directly at the viewer, but like the other two photos, she stands out from the scene she inhabits. In each photo the confident pose and/or direct gaze of the subjects appears to be challenging the viewer to tell them they don't belong.

Houle has curated an exhibition of contemporary artwork that is at once thought-provoking and powerful. Each of the artists uniquely addresses First Nations culture in urban and rural settings. This is especially relevant as more people temporarily or permanently leave their homes in search of work in growing cities such as Calgary.

TAMMY McGRATH is an interdisciplinary artist, art facilitator/curator and sessional instructor. She currently resides in Calgary, Alberta.

DISRUPTIVE MODELS: *Making Worlds*

53rd Venice Biennale • 7 June – 22 November, 2009

REVIEW BY Earl Miller

The 2009 Venice Biennale, *Making Worlds*, included a few solid exceptions to a largely apolitical exhibition. Take, for instance, the work of Anawana Haloba, Paolo W. Tamburella, Paul Chan and Ahmet Ögüt (from Zambia, the Union of the Comoros, Hong Kong and Turkey respectively), four artists who critically respond to globalization's cultural appropriation, exploitation and ensuing violence. Daniel Birnbaum, the exhibition curator, writes that *Making Worlds* reflects an "aspiration to explore worlds around us as well as worlds ahead." Haloba, Tamburella, Chan and Ögüt respond by asking whose worlds are being made in this global economy and just who is making them.

Anawana Haloba's *The Greater G8 Advertising Market Stand* (2007-09), for instance, exposes how G8 countries too often euphemize the cultural leveling of global trade by, for one thing, marketing products under the auspices of feel-good, ethical shopping. Haloba's interactive sculpture and sound installation centres on food samples from a range of "Third World" countries, at least according to the faux-fair trade packaging of the food containers they come in. Haloba displays these containers on what looks like a street market stand, which is actually built of European standard-size shipping pallets. This construction material is a clue that the products may be inauthentic while the biting satirical text completes disclosure: for example, Abdala Motor Oil, "Iraq's specialty" has the

slogan "free your conscious" written below it. Haloba alludes to the colonial era too: the Mullah noted on the Somali banana bread is Abdullah Hassan, the leader of the country's armed resistance against early 20th century colonization. The clincher, however, is that the expected exotic giveaways biennale visitors enthusiastically take from the containers turn out to be the very products found in Western grocery stores: cornflakes, milk toffee candies and other bulk food goods. Haloba, therefore, illustrates how globalization's introduction of new worlds — largely a marketing response to Westerners' progressive posturing — in reality leaves these worlds vulnerable to consumer colonization, a situation Haloba emphasizes by a sound component consisting of a narrator recounting a pre-global economic past.

The Union of the Comoros' contribution, Paolo W. Tamburella's *Djahazi* (2009), similarly points to how globalization has impacted developing countries. Tamburella moors five djahazi boats, traditional to Africa's Comoros Islands, in the Venetian Lagoon in front of the biennale grounds in Giardini Park. He places a disproportionately massive contemporary shipping container in each of them to symbolize how international trade overpowers regional culture. Although this placement appears absurd, it was indeed a shipping reality in this small country until as late as 2006 because Djahazi boats were the only means of getting the containers

ashore. Looking only slightly out of place in the port city of Venice, where traditional fishing boats occasionally do intermingle with the ubiquitous gondolas, passersby will find it difficult to determine if the boats are works of art. As a subtle intervention, *Djahazi* implies that the presence of global trade is especially pernicious when nearly invisible.

In contrast, Paul Chan shows the highly visible effects of Western intervention. The pictures leaked from the Abu Ghraib prison are a touchstone for world violence today for combining two key characteristics of globalization: American interference and the disseminative powers of the media. Accordingly, Chan's 2008-9 piece, *Sade for Sade's Sake* (a pun, of course, on art for art's sake), draws an analogy between the lurid appeal of Marquis de Sade's sexual exploits and the public appetite for the universally circulated Abu Ghraib torture porn photos. (Incidentally, de Sade was convicted specifically for sex-related crimes, unlike the military officials in charge of Abu Ghraib). A shadow play comprising a three-channel animated wall projection juxtaposes eerie silhouettes of whipped and beaten figures with those engaged in sexual acts — macabre images of sex mixed with sadism projected on a prison-like faded brick wall. The work includes a backdrop of black and purple abstract rectangles and squares resembling minimalist abstraction or simply works of art hung on walls, as if to indicate that this work, despite being so clearly politically discursive, remains anchored in the art world. Interconnected 45-second vignettes form an A-B-C-B rhyme scheme, a ballad of sexual violence referencing poetry of the 18th century, Marquis de Sade's era.

Tallying the results of global terrorism as opposed to indicating the American foreign policy that so often perpetuates it, Ahmet

<top> Paolo W. Tamburella. Installation and performance view of *Djahazi*, 2009. Courtesy: the artist. <middle left> Anawana Haloba. *The G8 Advertising Marketing Stand*, 2007. Photo: Wolfgang Günzel. Courtesy: the artist. <middle right> Ahmet Ögüt. Installation view of *Exploded City*, 2009. Courtesy: The Pavilion of Turkey. <bottom> Paul Chan. Installation view of *Sade for Sade's sake*, 2009. Courtesy: Greene Naftali Gallery

Ögüt's *Exploded City* (2009), part of the Turkish Pavilion's group exhibition *Lapses*, is an architectural model for a city comprising only buildings that have been devastated in real life. In this model though, the buildings are intact and await their fate. An accompanying text begins with Biennale site-specificity, mentioning the *Exploded City* as a "future city" that Venetian Marco Polo describes to emperor Kublai Khan — a reference to Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, an influential book among urbanists (and also for Ögüt) that reworks Polo's travel tales to describe cities of the imagination. In contrast, Ögüt's model is a dystopia of International Style and kitschy Post-Modern architecture: generic hotels, restaurants and other commercial buildings alongside unmemorable public edifices — museums, post offices and the like. The only thing making them notable is their shared fate of destruction. Buildings from across the world exist side by side in this truly multicultural city where hundreds of languages are spoken. Too bad the *Exploded City* remains under constant threat of terrorism.

The violent consequences of globalization's disruptive world-making is not the most visible of the many sub-theses of the 2009 Venice Biennale — the most omnibus of all biennials. But it is a theme which, once evinced, stands out as a much-needed collective voice of dissent. This voice convincingly argues that "making worlds" is about artists engaging in dialogue concerning ongoing domination over marginal worlds rather than artists creating their own imaginative realms.

EARL MILLER is an independent curator and art writer residing in Toronto. He holds a particular interest in Latin art.



BACKGROUND CHARACTERS: MARK LEWIS' *Backstory*

Presented in conjunction with *Cold Morning*, Canada Pavilion,
53rd International Art Exhibition, Venice Biennale, 2009
3 June – 6 June, 2009

REVIEW BY Michelle Jacques



Mark Lewis. *Backstory* (film still), 2009. Courtesy: the artist and Monte Clark Gallery, Vancouver, Clark & Faria, Toronto, galerie serge le borgne, Paris.

Rear projection. Even if you're not familiar with this term, you'd probably recognize the technique. Actors are transported to any locale or situation, simply by filming them in front of a screen onto which pre-existing background footage is cast from behind. The process was developed in the 1920s, fine tuned in the 1930s, and popularized by early Hollywood directors who wanted the variety of different settings in their movies without the expense of filming on location. Alfred Hitchcock was a proponent of the technique, and used it extensively in many of his films, including *Notorious* (1946), *North by Northwest* (1959), *The Birds* (1963) and *Mamie* (1964). Hitchcock may have first been drawn to the technique for reasons of economy and convenience; by the early 1960s, however, his budgets should have allowed him to film on location when he wanted to. Rear projection was a device for Hitchcock, employed to draw his viewer's attention to the artificiality of what was happening on the screen.

The exhibition on view at the Canadian Pavilion at the 53rd Venice Biennale features four films by Hamilton-born, London, U.K.-based artist Mark Lewis. Two of them, *Nathan Phillips Square*, *a Winter's Night*, *Skating* (2009) and *The Fight* (2008), use rear projection. To create *Nathan Phillips Square*, Lewis used footage shot at Toronto City Hall's skating rink as his backdrop against which to film a young couple gliding around a small artificial rink in a Hollywood soundstage. *The Fight* combines a background filmed in Vienna with a reenactment of a clash between a Romany family and a group of white women and men. Technological advances in rear projection technology mean that the distinctive, washed-out look that defined its early usage has been minimized, yet there is something about the relationship between foreground and background that makes it evident that things are not exactly as they seem.

While he began his artistic career as a still photographer, in the late 1990s Lewis began

to work exclusively with moving images. The inimitability of his work perhaps rests in his ability to engage fully with an exploration of how films are made while creating moving images that often possess a still, even painterly quality. In *Algonquin Park, Early March* (2002), a work which is a contemporary exploration of a geographical site that has been made mythical by the paintings of Tom Thompson and the Group of Seven, the slow zoom out of the camera lens is perfectly timed to the four-minute length of a single reel of 35mm film. From the initial, unidentifiable field of white through a series of small visual revelations, we are led from pure sensation to a fuller understanding of what we are looking at.

Lewis' reputation has been built around these concise but visually packed films that are presented as video projections in gallery spaces, and isolate and subtly reveal the history of art and the techniques of cinema and invite the watchful viewer to think about how moving images are constructed. Additionally, the intersection of cultures is a feature of both *The Fight* and *Nathan Phillips Square*, one which has roused discussions of such topics as diversity, post-colonialism, and globalism in Lewis' work. Given the subtlety with which Lewis blends these concerns, *Backstory* (2009), the verging-on-campy documentary about the Hansards, proprietors of the family-run, Culver City-based production company that has dominated the field of rear projection work in Hollywood for over 70 years, feels, at first, like a slightly ill-fitting addendum. Lewis used them for his rear projection work, and was inspired to create a fairly conventional talking-heads

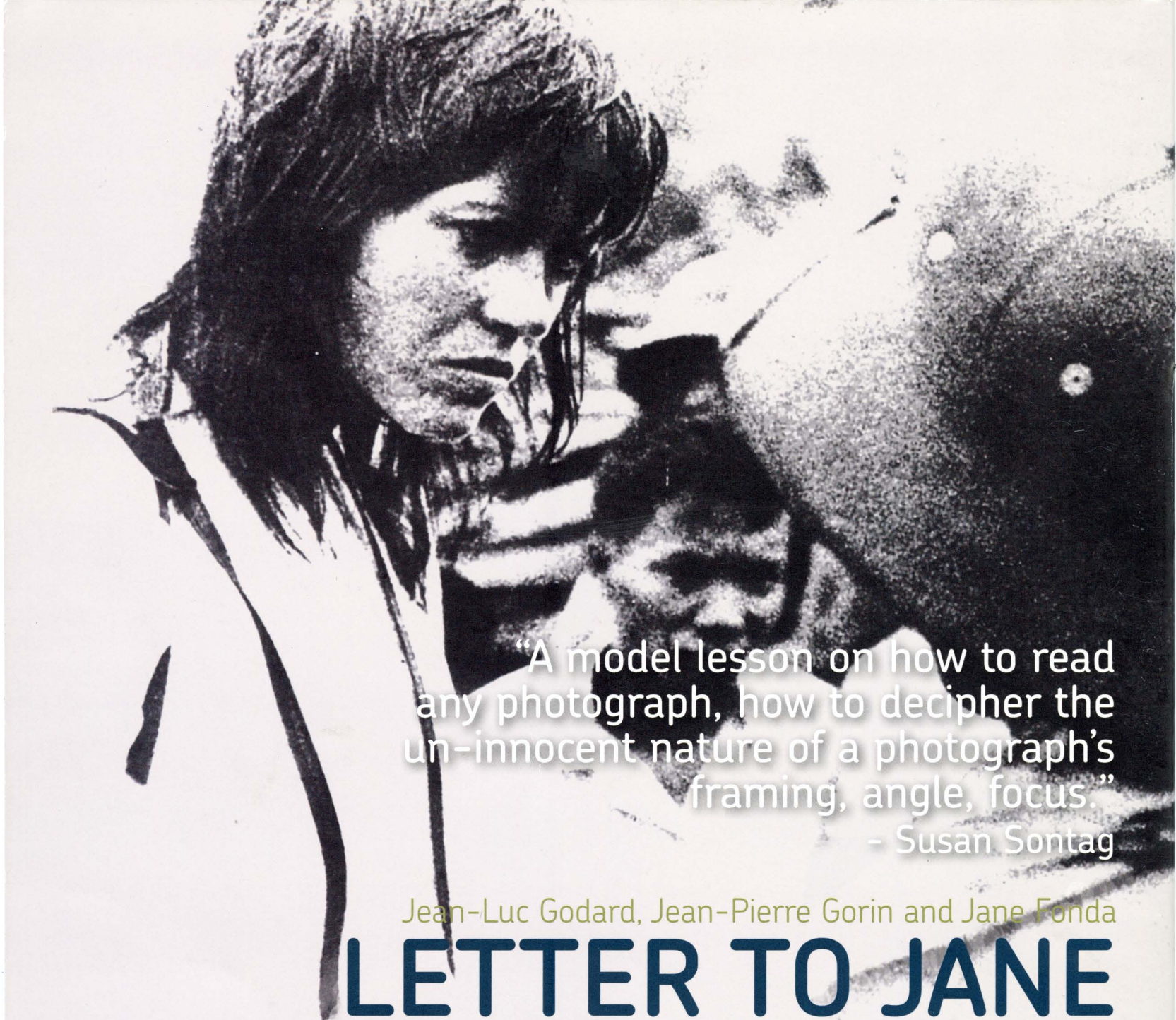
style documentary, made remarkable by the almost slapstick antics of the father-and-son Hansard team — William and William, Sr. and Jr. — and the liberal use of rear projection backdrops against which they tell their story. They describe the founding of the family business by William Sr.'s father, the heyday of the technique in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, and its inevitable decline as new technologies — first the blue screen process and then increasingly complex computer effects — were introduced.

The senior Hansard tells tales about the actors they worked with; his son reveals family skeletons. Their delivery is unrehearsed. Their appearance is slightly disheveled. They are not particularly poised. The individuals who toiled behind the scenes of the films of Hollywood's bygone era are not particularly charming. They're regular guys who discuss their work from a technical perspective, peppering their presentations with a few off-colour stories about the people they met along the way.

Lewis' gallery works draw his viewers' attention to the mechanics of the filmic medium. Segregating camera movements, or filming and editing techniques, he encourages us to understand how the moving image is constructed and how we participate in that construction. In *Backstory*, he uncovers another layer of the Hollywood apparatus — our collective tendency to mythicize and romanticize the people who make movies.

MICHELLE JACQUES is a curator and writer based in Toronto.





“A model lesson on how to read
any photograph, how to decipher the
un-innocent nature of a photograph’s
framing, angle, focus.”
- Susan Sontag

Jean-Luc Godard, Jean-Pierre Gorin and Jane Fonda

LETTER TO JANE

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Letter to Jane is part of the series, *The Way of the Termite: The Essay Film*, playing November 6 through December 3. These films are passionate and combative, tackling ideas in mischievous ways that defy the labels “fact” and “fiction.”

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