

Volume 21 Number 2 \$5.50 A magazine about issues of art and culture

FUSE

MAGAZINE

Argentina:
Going to Market

Space—Art—Politics
in Turkey



R.W. Hill on Relativism & Hybridity
Artists' pages by Michael Belmore & Paul Seesequasis, Philippe Maurais
Browser—Artropolis '97
7A*11D
Inside Out/Outside In
Representing Dissent
Big-Box Knockout
Miasma

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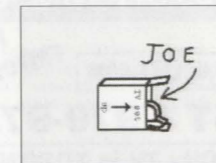
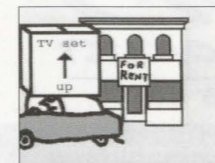
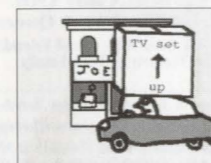
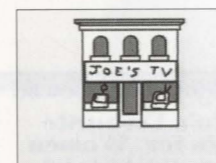
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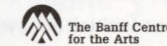
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FUSE
MAGAZINE

VOLUME 21 NUMBER 2 SPRING 1998

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WITHOUT MALICE

Writing the editorial for each issue of FUSE is always a difficult task. The concerns and positions of the articles that FUSE has published over the last twenty years are always diverse. This issue of FUSE is no different. Articles ranging from the consideration of art practices in Turkey and Argentina; to articles discussing the challenges that exhibiting artists must deal with; to articles investigating the tensions between ethnic absolutism and hybridity in Native cultures; to the return of performance art; to book reviews, CD reviews and reviews of various festivals, this issue of FUSE is filled with considerations of various communities. Communities that are often not represented within the confines of "mainstream" public spaces. As well the two artists' projects in this issue of FUSE remind us and return us to history and the memory of the post-industrial moment. Alternative magazines continue to matter and will continue to matter in a cultural climate where consumption seems to define our citizenship.

Most recently two incidents have characterized the possible deliberate misunderstanding of alternative or little magazines. In an article in the January 1998 issue of *Masthead: The magazine about magazines*, FUSE and *Border/lines* were identified as mags which tried to imitate zines in their designs. Such a claim lacks any basis in the histories of both mags. In fact, it might be argued that the "little mags" with their quirky designs created the atmosphere and possibilities for the arrival of zines. The little mags preceded zine culture.

Similarly Antonia Zerbisias in the Saturday Toronto Star (February 28, 1998) suggested that funding of the "little mags" was a waste of taxpayers' money because no one reads them. Her unfounded claims do not acknowledge that different mags have different audiences in mind. She would not have compared the readership of *Sports Illustrated* and *Vanity Fair*. But what is clear is that Zerbisias's comments betray a certain neo-conservatism.

The continuing desire to make all cultural expression "commercial" in the face of continuing government cutbacks to arts funding in both the province of Ontario and at the federal level is implicated in Zerbisias's claims. Zerbisias's claims are troubling because she deliberately misrepresents the little mags as meaningless—then later concedes that some artists are able to write and exhibit their work in them. Therefore the little mags help to support the starving, unknown artists. Yet she does not account for the role that the little mags play and continue to play in nurturing talent. Some of the columnists at her paper got their start writing in the little mags. Additionally, Zerbisias refuses to

acknowledge the role that passing on mags plays in circulation, or even that magazines like FUSE in fact are available on newsstands across Canada and the U.S.

More important, Zerbisias seems to have no information on how the little mags impact on other aspects of our culture. Many of the stories that little mags cover eventually find their way to being covered in "mainstream" contexts. The little mags are a part of an artistic, cultural and academic network that, despite popular myths, has profound impacts on our society. The mags are not produced for suburbanites to relax with on the Go Train ride out of the city, and if Zerbisias can't understand them she might want to occasionally read something more than *Time*, *Newsweek* and *Flare*.

The little mags exist not only because of government funds—even though government funds play an important role. The little mags exist because many of us refuse and reject cookie-cutter interpretations of post-industrial life. The little mags remind us of thinking otherwise—ways of thinking that many do not want to encounter. In this issue of FUSE we break with tradition by not summarizing the articles. However, this little mag assures you that each one of the articles in this issue asks, in fact requires us to think otherwise concerning issues we might already have been comfortable with. The little mags are here to disturb, not to comfort.



letter

Dear Fusers,

Thank you for the vol. 20, no. 5 issue of FUSE. It was forwarded from our old address in Kansas City, Missouri. We'd been seeing FUSE since its founding. Know such names as Lisa Steele & Kim Tomczak. Know that FUSE has been through hard times, but its heartening to see how remarkably it has grown. The Nov. '97 issue is a typographical beauty with highly praiseworthy presentation, fascinating content we are eager to read. The magazine, with its stunning covers, conveys the feeling of sensitive yet sophisticated artistry. FUSE has grown from a struggling beginning to a superlative periodical for artists by artists. A heap of congratulations from two octogenarian U.S. admirers.

—Joseph and Jane Janson, February 5, 1998

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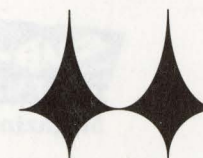
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The Problem With Killing Columbus

RELATIVISM, ETHNIC NATIONALISM AND HYBRIDITY

by Richard William Hill

When I was a very young kid I used to fantasize about going back in time and killing Christopher Columbus. I can still picture the scene. Columbus is putting ashore on an island in the Caribbean. He and some of his crew stride purposefully up the beach and are about to compose themselves into that famous scene so popular in elementary school text books; the one where Columbus plants the flag and claims the new world for Spain. He raises the standard and is about to thrust it into the sand. Suddenly a shot rings out from the jungle. Columbus clutches his chest and staggers back. The flag slips from his hand as he falls to the sand, dead. His attendants look hurriedly around and then flee in panic. North America is saved from colonization and its indigenous inhabitants live happily ever after in an Eden-like paradise.

Although tame by today's standards—my mental picture of death by gunfire was inspired by *Hawaii Five-O*, not *Pulp Fiction*—I admit this is a violent and somewhat creepy fantasy for a little kid to be having. It's not that I was a particularly morbid child; I wasn't the Lee Harvey Oswald of the elementary school set, skulking from class to class, nursing my violent fantasies. I was just trying to imagine a way to do something about the injustices of colonization that my mother, who was of Cree and Blackfoot descent, was teaching me about. I really believed that bit about the Eden-like paradise too. This was also my mother's doing. To inoculate us against the negative stereotypes she knew we would encounter, she would often idealize pre-contact Native culture, and use it as a contrast to some contemporary social problem.

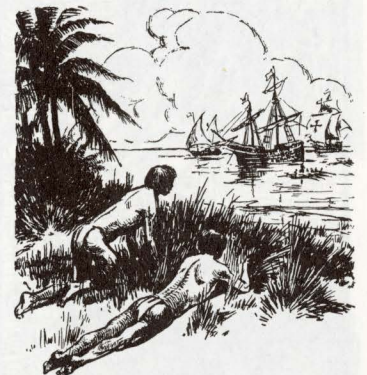
My mother wasn't particularly fond of my Columbus assassination fantasy, however. She had very little patience for violence in the first place and although she was genuinely idealistic, she always tempered it with a sense of realism. After all, unless I could hurry up and invent a time machine the whole scheme wasn't going to go very far. More importantly, she reminded me of the most serious flaw in my plan.

"If you did that then you would never have been born, would you?" This was a contingency that, believe it or not, I hadn't accounted for. My dad is German, after all. So much for simple solutions to interracial relations.

I recount this story because over the past several years I've been trying to understand how the tolerant and open-ended respect for tradition that was the cultural milieu that I grew up in, has, in some parts of the Native community, been transformed into rigid essentialism, ethnic nationalism and, in extreme instances, doctrines of racial purity. As a kid I was virtually never given orders about what do or how to think. I got suggestions and advice, but the expectation was that it was my responsibility to decide what to make of these. In this sense I have always felt that I had a "traditional" Native upbringing. Lately, however, I've been noticing that the notion of tradition is often being used as a bludgeon in aid of social conformity. This tendency has made me rethink my relationship to the idea of tradition and to some of its possible interpretations and consequences.

There seems to be a powerful connection between essentialist notions of traditional authority and epistemology: the former seems to flow from assumptions about the latter. An example of this is evident in a review of N. Scott Momaday's book *Man Made of Words* that was published recently in *Aboriginal Voices* magazine. The reviewer, Millie Knapp, writes:

One incongruity in Momaday's writing is his support of the Bering Strait theory.¹ Momaday knows the creation stories of his own Kiowa people. He makes reference to the creation story in which Kiowa people emerge from a log. Does he believe that this log originally



existed in Asia? Momaday clearly doesn't see the logic of creation stories to mean that Native American people originated here on this continent. For example, the creation story of the Haudenosaunee (or Iroquois) begins with Sky Woman who falls and lands on the back of a turtle island or North America.²

Let me say first that I am not particularly interested in whether Native origins are in Asia or North America. The

fact that some people are obsessed with origins is a telling one, but I find the question itself fairly low on my list of priorities. What is interesting are the epistemological assumptions that the reviewer makes. How do we know something? We reference traditional and/or religious authority. This is not a question of disputing the interpretation of archaeological or other data. There is no reason to look at empirical evidence or to reason about its meaning when that process is subordinate to sacred truth. When traditional religious authority becomes the primary criterion for making judgments, truth ends up based not on better observation and analysis of the world as we experience it, but on who has the most "authentic" interpretation of traditional beliefs.

The problem then becomes one of how to resolve conflicting religious beliefs. Using the example of the quotation above, what do we do about contradictory tribal origin stories? Knapp implies that we should each believe the origin stories of our own cultural group. This seems to be a cultural relativist position. By this I mean that she seems not only to acknowledge that different cultural groups have different beliefs, but she also implies that the beliefs of each group are true, at least for that group. Therefore, Kiowa origin stories are true for Kiowa people, Haudenosaunee origin stories for Haudenosaunee people, and so forth. If this is the case it also follows that we can test the truth of our beliefs and values by seeing if they accord with the beliefs and values of our cultural group.

I think the relativist position is problematic for a number of reasons. First, it is logically difficult to understand how various contradictory accounts can all be true. There are also more explicitly political objections. If the truth of a judgment is relative to the beliefs and values of your cultural group, how can you explain or justify dissent or plurality of opinion within your group? Or new ideas and change? If you do acknowledge that change is inevitable in any culture



—and it's pretty hard not to—then what criteria does a culture use to decide which changes to make if legitimate knowledge has been limited to that culture's own pre-existing beliefs?

At least as troubling for the relativist is the question: how do you account for and mediate the mixing of different cultural groups? Which parent's cultural beliefs should a mixed-race child hold? How do you decide if you have two or more contradictory traditions to choose from? Unlike Knapp, whom I know to be an accepting and tolerant person, there are those who resort to a kind of ethnic nationalism and therefore find this problem especially vexing. They sometimes "solve" it by concluding that the mixing of races or cultures should simply be avoided.

An example of this sort of ethnic nationalism can be found in a recent issue of *Aboriginal Voices* magazine. An article by Leslie Logan starts out as a *Cosmopolitan*-style reflection on "why good Native men are hard to find" but fairly quickly descends into the following:

Why is a good Native man so hard to come by and why do we care? Why not just settle for a nice white guy? For me and my peers, to settle for a nice white guy is to completely capitulate to the temptations of society; a culture that is not only foreign, but antithetical to our traditional values and beliefs, even at this late stage in time. And as if that weren't enough, there is the fear of being responsible for and contributing to the erosion and thinning of bloodlines.³

Note the appeal to preserving traditional values. Underlying this attitude is, of course, the terrible colonial history of the Americas in which cultural interactions have been poisoned by coercion and an imbalance of power. Unfortunately, this is precisely what the writer above does not focus on. Instead she

singles out difference itself as the problem and applies it uniformly to all white men.

This is an especially problematic response at this moment in history. Because most of the energy spent on "preserving" traditional culture is focused on religion or spirituality, I think that the most dramatic cultural change that has occurred since contact is often overlooked. This is the fact that colonialism has, to a large extent, transformed us from collective societies who share material goods to individually competitive participants in global capitalism. This is now an international problem effecting everyone, Native, white or otherwise. And in all honesty, how many of us can say we aren't implicated in capitalism in some way? Who doesn't consume fast food, watch TV, buy name-brand products or work for large corporations? Like it or not we already live in a world of hybridity, one that demands a complex response.

We can see just how monstrous contempt for hybridity can become in the recent writing of American Indian activist Russell Means. Although Means claims his beliefs are based in Native tradition, his argument is made in terms highly reminiscent of nineteenth-century European racial doctrine. The following is from his autobiography *Where White Men Fear To Tread*:

Golden eagles don't mate with bald eagles, deer don't mate with antelope, gray wolves don't mate with red wolves. Just look at domesticated animals, at mongrel dogs, and mixed-breed horses, and you'll know the Great Mystery didn't intend them to be that way. We weakened the species and introduced disease by mixing what should be kept separate. Among humans, intermarriage weakens the respect people have for themselves and for their traditions. It undermines clarity of spirit & mind.⁴

Another author agrees and states his case in almost the same terms. I quote:

...every animal mates only with a member of the same species. The titmouse seeks the titmouse, the finch the finch, the stork the stork, the field mouse the field mouse, the dormouse the dormouse, the wolf, the she-wolf, etc...⁵

If you haven't guessed, this author is Adolf Hitler. The quotation is from his chapter on race in *Mein Kampf*. In fact, each point made in Means' quotation can be found in Nazi ideology. An excellent place to observe Nazi doctrine in its most stripped down form is a repellent

To inoculate us against the negative stereotypes she knew we would encounter, she would often idealize pre-contact Native culture, and use it as a contrast to some contemporary social problem.

little book that was used as a school primer for the Hitler Youth. Not so coincidentally, it treats the problem of racial mixing with an example drawn from the Americas:

During the colonization of Paraguay by the Jesuits in the early 19th Century, for example, a marriage law was promulgated, according to which the white settlers might marry only natives, Indian women. Perhaps it was thought that in this way natives could be raised to the level of the whites. In reality this mixing produced unfortunate hybrids, which were to be counted neither as whites nor as natives. They inherited the worst characteristics of both groups, being uncertain and unstable both in spirit and soul.⁶

Aside from the assumption of white superiority, this is precisely Means' position.

If this comparison seems unnecessarily inflammatory, think about what these ideas really mean. They mean that it would be better if mixed bloods—like me, and for that matter my girlfriend, my brother and a lot of my friends—didn't exist. It means that we are inferior to those of "pure" blood. It means that Native identity is fixed and that new ideas can only be seen as contamination. These assumptions are not just wrong because they disparage mixed bloods. They are wrong because they confine and limit what Native people can be. They are a form of self-imprisonment that has everything to do with social control and nothing to do with liberation.

I can think of another example of Native essentialism used as a form of social control. The boldest story that *Aboriginal Voices* magazine has published to date is an article about the gay actor Billy Merasty.⁷ Written by Miles Morrisseau, it contained an indictment of homophobia in the Native community. The photographs that illustrated the story were really terrific. Merasty loves to do drag, you see, and some of





Victoria Regina, Beverly Koski, 1997, digitally modified photographs. Courtesy of the artist.

the pictures were sultry, erotically charged shots of him dressed as a woman. This was no cautious liberal plea for same-sex marriage rights and gay family values. It was an outright celebration of Merasty's sexuality. And it really bugged some people.

One person, a Native woman from a rural community, insisted to me that dressing up in drag is "such an un-Native thing to do." Since Merasty is Native and he obviously does dress up in drag, this seems at first to be a confusing statement. The opinion only makes sense if you take the category of "Native" to be based not on what contemporary Native people actually do, but on a traditional, uncorrupted ideal. Aside from the social restriction inherent in this position, there is also the tricky problem of sorting out traditional from new values. Considering that the person who said this was educated in a Christian boarding school, we might suspect that this discomfort has its origins in that experience rather than an alleged traditional Native prohibition against drag.

I would also guess that it has more to do with small-town than traditional Native values.

However satisfying it is to critique this anti-drag sentiment as not being a legitimate expression of Native tradition, I want to be able to go farther. I want to be able to say that even if homophobia or doctrines of racial purity were traditional values, even if they were the most sacred traditional values, they would still be wrong.

Although many Native artists have rejected essentialist notions of identity, until recently only a few have represented cultural hybridity in ways that avoid situating Native and non-Native cultures in a binary

relationship. The most interesting artwork dealing with the mixing of race and culture that I am aware of is a piece by Beverly Koski called *Victoria Regina*. It is a reinterpretation of a Victorian era treaty medal. The original has a bust of Queen Victoria herself on one side and an image of a white man and a Native man shaking hands on the other. Beverly digitally re-works this coercive, propagandic image of Native-white relations into a playful but strong assertion of her own complex hybridity. On the front is an image of Victoria Koski—her Anishnabe mother—looking young, cool, and in her own way regal, in a pair of nifty cat's-eye sunglasses. On the opposite side, computer manipulated into the original medal's landscape of teepees before a radiant sunrise, is an image of her father, who is white, holding her when she was a baby. Here is an image of hybridity based in love and the deep connections of a family relationship. It is based in an idea of blood and culture mixed not in discreetly identifiable "halves" but in inextricably complex ways.

The work is not insensitive to power relationships. The coerciveness of the original is acknowledged; even the relationship of the colonized taking on the name of the colonizer is referenced. But this relationship is set on its head both by the assertive act of art making itself and by the powerful image of her mother who, although not a sovereign, has sovereignty over herself—and has an identity that won't be confined.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

1. The Bering Strait theory suggests that North American Natives originally migrated from Asia to North America across the Bering Strait during the last ice age.
2. Millie Knapp, "Man Made of Words" (review), *Aboriginal Voices* 4, no. 3, p. 44.
3. Leslie Logan, "Looking for Love," *Aboriginal Voices* 4, no. 4, p. 44.
4. Russell Means with Marvin Wolf, *Where White Men Fear to Tread*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995) p. 110.
5. Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, Ralph Manheim trans., (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1943) p. 284.
6. Harwood L. Childs (trans.), *The Nazi Primer: Official Handbook of Schooling the Hitler Youth*, (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1939) pp. 7-8.
7. Miles Morrisseau, "Girlie Boy: Billy Merasty," *Aboriginal Voices* 3, no. 3, pp. 22-25.

Inside Out/Outside In?

RUMINATIONS ON MEDIA ART FESTIVALS, ARTS FUNDING, VIDEO ART, AIDS, QUEERNESS AND COMMUNITY

by Andrew James Paterson

Toronto is on the verge of catching up to Montreal with regard to its plenitude of film (and video) festivals. In addition to what is now called The Toronto International Film Festival (formerly The Festival of Festivals) Torontonians are now offered The Reel Asian Film Festival, the film and video component of Desh Pardesh, the Southern Currents Latino Film Festival, the Rendezvous With Madness Festival, and others—in addition to the annual Images and Inside/Out film and video festivals. More festivals mean many things—greater competition for public and government purses as well as for corporate sponsorships and media coverage. The festivals that initially established themselves and then continued to develop are the ones that have shown aptitudes for achieving profiles.

All of these festivals contain Queer or at least Queer-related content. We do after all allegedly comprise ten percent of "the public" and gay dollars have been paramount to commercial economies for some time now—in fact, a large percentage of the gay lifestyle media takes pride in the fact that fags, dykes and maybe even a few other Queer shit-disturbers are superior to straights when it comes to making and then spending. The Queer presence in practically all of Toronto's media arts festivals has benefited the annual Inside/Out Lesbian & Gay Festival—viewers plan their schedules around what has already been shown in addition to what is visible within Inside/Out's programming. Still, the Inside/Out Festival is the one Toronto media arts event that has shown the steadiest growth—or the greatest "progress."

The recent 7th Annual Inside/Out Lesbian & Gay (and Bisexual and Transgendered and...) Film and Video Festival was enthusiastically praised by its staff and volunteers as the best one yet. On the occasion of the finale—the Best of The Fest-cum-awards ceremony—everybody was smiling and, for the most part, deservedly so. Certainly this Inside Out was the best attended, with practically all of its some forty-five programmes sold out and the theatres always looking full.

1997 has been a make-or-break year for many in the arts and cultural sectors. I'd like to consider the Inside/Out Festival in a context of today's economic and political climates for time-based or media art works. The relentless cuts coming from both The Canada Council and, here in Ontario, from the provincial arts council under pressure from the most reactionary provincial government in many of our memories (and not to mention the unstable climates surrounding the Toronto Arts Council with regard to the already-dreadful megacity) have made it clear to media-arts programmes and festivals that it's time to either put up or shut up.

The arts funding advocacy rhetoric that justifies government or public cultural funding on the grounds that arts and culture are good rather than taxing for the economy has always seemed more applicable to performing arts rather than visual arts. Mainstream theatre, homegrown drama (especially that for which tele-broadcast or extended theatrical play is pending or obviously possible) and concert-oriented

WORLD-CLASS & QUEER



Jodie: An Icon, Pratibha Parmar, UK, 1996, video, 25 min. Photo: Courtesy Associated Press.

YOU GOTTA BE STRONG YOU GOTTA BE TOUGH

music seem easier to explain to individuals and interest groups who are suspicious about elitist, tax-wasting art than painting, sculpture, and the more experimental time-based art practices for which exhibition possibilities are limited at best. But time-based works, even of the not-necessarily performing variety, still imply and demand public presentations for which audiences are a prime (if not *the* prime) part of the operative equation.

Thus Toronto's time-based media-arts festivals have had to take the bull by the horn, so to speak. They have been forced to "perform." No longer can festivals such as Inside/Out (or Images) be seen as small, durable and reliable—relatively isolated events catering to small and loyal audiences or repeat viewers. These festivals, to put it mildly, have had to both outgrow and translate beyond their initial root "communities" or else they would become media-arts history.

Since the Inside/Out Festival's inception in 1991 the festival has grown steadily. Initially many Queer film and video producers primarily wished to showcase their works before Queer or at least Queer-positive audiences. Initiated by a Queer media-arts collective, the festival provided space for varieties of approaches to film and to video. The festival immediately provided screening opportunities for works that were either too Queer for some festivals or not arty enough for others. Simultaneously, as submissions became greater in number, and from more varied sources, the festival expanded far beyond just programming somebody's work because the producer was known to be a practicing Queer. From 1991 to 1996 not only did audiences grow steadily, the programming became increasingly international in flavour as contacts were made and then strengthened with other festivals as well as distributors.

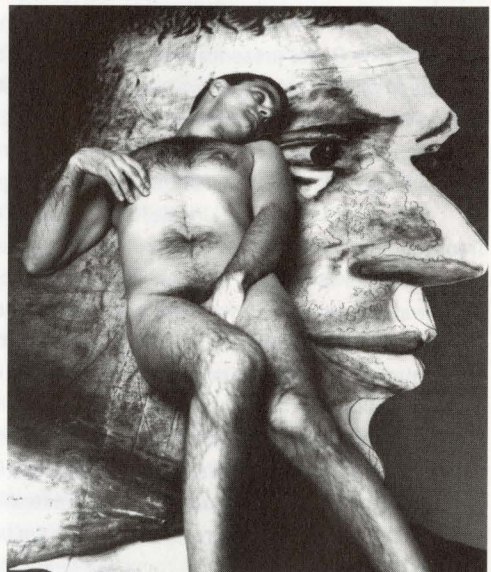
The collapse of the Metropolitan Theatre, which had been the poorly defined ghost of The Euclid Theatre—initially founded to showcase Toronto's independent media-arts producers and programming curated by that "community" but which had clearly failed to "progress" beyond that community or audience—provided an opportunity for the Inside/Out Festival to boldly increase its public profile. With increased and essential corporate funding (Yes, Mary, Queers do fly Air Canada) the 1997 festival took place at two of the four Cumberland Cinemas on toney Bloor Street Central, where many viewers and producers alike are casually reminded of their own relative lack of disposable incomes. Oddly enough, the Cumberland Cinemas are yearly deployed by the Toronto International Film Festival for those films or film-programmes for which smaller crowds are anticipated. Inside/Out festival director Ellen Flanders wittily described the move as "bringing the back streets to Bay Street"—the festival itself was hardly going mainstream but it was moving armies of perverts and their diversity of images into the mainstream—creating accessibility by means of presence.

But... is "the mainstream" simply a location? Is it primarily an economic reality or economic construction? Is it a particular mindset that disdains hermetically formalist approaches or that does not sit well with, say, obtuse representational strategies, varying film and tape stocks, dense visual and audio montages in which the relationship between picture and sound does not telegraph obvious meaning and therefore the viewers are required to work? Or does "mainstream" refer to a huge untapped audience or audience-potential that has either never known about Toronto's very own Queer film festival or else has been alienated by previous out-of-the-way locations and apparently difficult programming? Or does mainstream refer to a gay and lesbian and Queer visibility in dominant media that needs to be shaken up and given a few good boots? And from what "margins" is "mainstream" in opposition to? From what marginality is the mainstream a logical or necessarily inevitable progression?

The higher-profile location benefited this year's festival in many ways. The Festival became more social, even for those who weren't on the schmooze scene but who had a more social part of town to mingle in. Exhibiting producers were granted passes to the entire festival. Festival guests were identifiable by their badges that read:

QU'EST-CE QUE C'EST MAINSTREAM?

Charlene's Angels, Donna Quince, Canada, 1996, video, 10 min.
Photo: courtesy V Tape.



UN@UT, John Greyson, Canada, 1997, 16mm, 89 min.
Photo: Guntar Kravis.

NAME; FILMMAKER—even if the producer's particular works included among the festival programming were in fact produced, post-produced or exhibited on video.

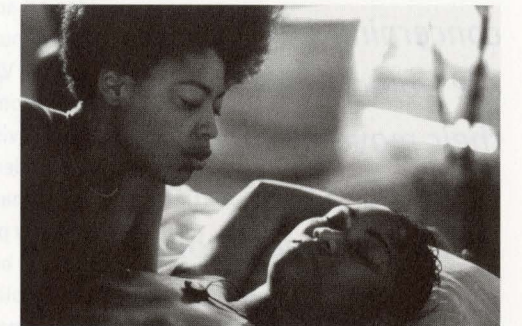
The 1997 festival took place at a period in time in which distinctions between film and video had become superficially blurred, but only superficially. During the Inside/Out Festival (as well as during the Images Festival and, for that matter, among many not only younger producers but also some of their instructors and resident technicians) the festival was often referred to as a film festival and all of the artists filmmakers. This is also a period in time in which primarily but not exclusively younger artists are quite cynical and frustrated regarding arts-funding structures as well as art-world hierarchies and their systems of filing and categorization. Increasingly, many time-based producers are describing their works as "film"—regardless of whatever substance the source materials have been "filmed" or recorded on. This tendency may be due to a variety of factors, some of them conflicting and even contradictory.

A key component of the mandate of the original or initial Inside/Out Collective (as well as the Images Festival) was the festival's intention to exhibit video art and film alongside each other in the same venues. In the late '80s, when a movement for Toronto to have its own gay and lesbian film festival was articulated and then put into practice, a good deal of the video art being produced both locally and internationally was narrative in its styles and focuses. Some producers—both Queer and straight—were continuing to deploy sculptural, performative and collage strategies that initially characterized the video art medium. But many producers were edging their way toward something more referent to feature films or television, toward something more explicable or "mainstream." Video art works in the late '80s often not only had stories to tell, they had professional actors. This was a shift from the medium's initial performative impetus—in which boundaries between "acting," "performance" and "autobiography" were intentionally opaque rather than clear or distinct. Many of the videotapes produced in the late '80s anticipated and welcomed their own projection onto a filmic screen—this mode of exhibition for video art had already been implemented by such formative events as Toronto's New Work shows of 1984 and 1986. Video producers had to think in terms of the larger frame, rather than the intimately problematized portrait. Video became more "public" than "private," so to speak.

"Video art"—not unlike its not so distant cousin "performance art"—has in its thirty-or-so-year existence been suspected by many different individuals and even interest groups of being a hermetic, formalist and essentially elitist medium. Some formative video art did position itself obliquely rather than directly to its "audiences." Some of it, in contrast was extremely "in your face" about itself. Nevertheless, the spectre of elitism and willful inaccessibility—buttressed by arts-funding privilege as well as racial and class privileges—has stuck to the medium. Many individuals who use Camcorders frequently, in a manner not unlike the artists who co-opted this problematic military tool to declare their own body politics in the late '60s and early '70s, do not declare themselves to be "video artists." Some do not even consider themselves to be artists—rejecting elitist connotations of that very word. Many Super 8 filmmakers also share this distrust of institutional art-world phraseologies. And, for practical reasons, many Super 8 filmmakers transfer their works to VHS-video for distribution and exhibition purposes. To many producers of Super 8, Hi-8 or Camcorder 8, the distinctions between film and video are negligible.

The word "video" for many people, refers to the home entertainment industry—to a more private than public space. Video is something rented for an evening at home with the vcr. Video is a viewing format rather than an autonomous medium. For many, "video" seems to refer to music videos, which are more often than not shot on various film stocks. Many feature and short films are now off-lined and even on-lined on video

IF IT MOVES, IT'S A MOVIE



The Body of a Poet, Sonali Fernando, UK, 1995, video, 29 min.
Photo: courtesy Women Make Movies.

The Watermelon Woman, Cheryl Dunye, USA, 1996, 35mm, 90 min.
Photo: courtesy First Run Features.



MAKE IT FAST, OR MAKE IT LONG



1919, Noam Gonick, Canada, 1997, video, 9 min.
Photo: Szu Burgess.

Video artists, as well as experimental filmmakers, are constantly inundated with questions concerning when they are going to make their move by making a feature — as if such a move is a desirable as well as a career-necessary progression.

performances rather than dramatic acting may well confuse and exhaust certain targeted audiences.

Many time-based artists who have continued working with the video medium have moved toward installational formats and away from narrative. Many time-based artists who began their careers with video have moved toward either television drama or feature films. (Some, to their credit, do a little creative oscillation.) Video artists, as well as experimental filmmakers, are constantly inundated with questions concerning when they are going to make their move by making a feature — as if such a move is a desirable as well as a career-necessary progression. While many different and often conflicting factors play in producers' choices of medium and approach — audience, distribution, access, perhaps even size of frame and picture resolutions — I am suspicious of any notion that a trajectory from video to film is essentially progressive.

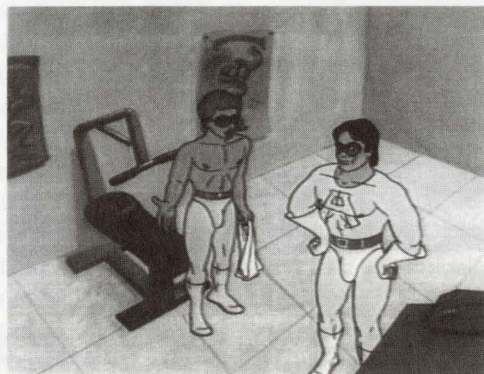
However, it certainly is less of a promotional mouthful for Inside/Out and similar festivals to be referred to as "film festivals." There has been a creative surge of low-budget works, shot usually on Super 8, Hi-8 or Camcorder. These speedy works combine many of the attributes of formative video and performance art with post-MTV attention spans. The sculptural basis of works by such seminal video artists as Vito Acconci, Eleanor Antin or Colin Campbell is either absent or else parodied. Many of these works in Toronto and other North American cities and even some European centres are either self-funded or produced through activist initiatives (for example locally the 3-Minute Rock star festival and the On The Fly short film — actually Hi 8 — festival) operating independently of government funding. Many of the emerging artists involved are arguably appropriating the world of "film" even when working with low-end materials. These initiatives and interventions are vital and in fact necessary. However, I wish there was more of a balance in the festival between the fast and furious and the features that comprised much of the festival's programming. Many of the works conceived and executed on film are in fact exhibited on video as videotapes, and thus are more portable and cheaper to fly within the international postal system. Does this fact make those particular works videotapes? I wouldn't think so, myself.

More than ever the festival's content leaned toward features that constituted programmes by themselves, with the occasional preceding short thrown in for good measure. The emphasis was increasingly international, as many of the works have been touring the global Queer festival circuit. The programmers' initiative in obtaining and presenting works that undoubtedly would not be seen otherwise can only be applauded. The festival's initiative in booking features that played at last year's Toronto International Film Fest but that either remained without distribution or else have missed out on

by means of transferring the film stock and then creating an edit decision list with an AVID computer. Video here becomes a material component of the finished film — a transitional material.

Also, at this particular moment in time video art actually has a high profile in parallel, public and even some commercial art galleries. Video installations and projections have become *au courant* over the past few years for visual arts (rather than performing arts) audiences. Much recent video art, even its more narrative manifestations, has been creatively plundering the medium's formative origins in body sculpture and performance as well as political activism. But video art may seem to many viewers and even programmers to be a dated medium — its constructed sets, long-takes and emphasis on portraitive

Ambiguously Gay Duo #1, J.J. Sedelmaier, USA, 1996, video, 3 min. Photo: courtesy the artist.



MURDER and murder, Yvonne Rainer, USA, 1996, 16mm, 113 min. Photo: courtesy Zeitgeist Films.

theatrical release was personally appreciated. But I would have liked to see viewers' choices less polarized between features or collections of shorts. I would have liked to have seen more films or tapes in a thirty to forty-five minute range that did not seem obviously made for television (television of course is the other superficial blender of film and video). That timeframe is well suited to a rigorous collage-essay approach (mixing documentary and found/archival footage with performance and perhaps even footnotes) that characterized my personal favourites of the features I witnessed.

The 1997 festival occurred in a period of time in which AIDS—the ongoing epidemic and representations of AIDS-related situations and conundrums—is undergoing a transitional stage. Many producers who have produced both activist and poignant AIDS-related tapes or films have either succumbed to the syndrome themselves or else decided that they have nothing further to say about the general subject.

AIDS: NOT GONE BUT BUBBLING UNDER

Representations of the epidemic, its casualties and its ravages have long been trivialized by liberal documentaries, boring movies-of-the-week, and by well-intentioned sexless features. Many producers are all too wary about making work that only winds up being absorbed into an ineffective conundrum. In 1997 Inside/Out did not include an AIDS programme *per se*, although AIDS was an underlying presence (or ghost) in many of the shorts programmes (particularly *Love Letters* and *Resistance is Fruitful*), in some of the features, and in the portraits and documentaries of deceased pioneers such as Derek Jarman and Marlon Riggs. (And in the voice of the late Vito Russo deployed by Mike Hoolboom in *Letters From Home*.) Again, these figures are not necessarily familiar to all those who were attending the programmes. I struck up a conversation with a few gentlemen in the line-ups who did not recognize the names of auteurs Jarman and Riggs. The names of these particular directors may remain with these viewers after the programme's conclusion, and they may or may not seek out other works from the respective oeuvres. This in itself is not bad at all. It also could be indicative of the fact that the Inside/Out Festival has a profile extending to viewers with very different viewing habits and selective processes than mine.

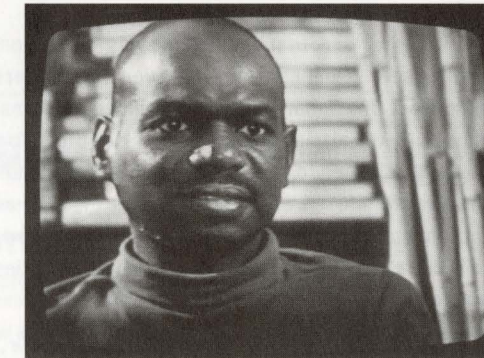
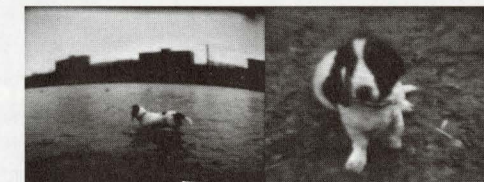
AIDS is itself being transformed — especially in the "mainstream media" from being a fatal illness to a manageable one. AIDS-related stories now fall on page fifteen rather than page one. AIDS has become both mainstream (here meaning over familiar) and marginal (it's still too early for conclusive work to be produced regarding protease inhibitors and HIV cocktails, and who is going to produce this work and where?) Already, Persons Living with HIV/AIDS, who may or may not have been cut off their HIV disability funds, which enable them to purchase and then use their protease inhibitors, are articulating some unpleasant side-effects with the drugs themselves. This relative silence within mainstream media (which perhaps has declared AIDS to have enjoyed its fifteen years) itself cries out for sharp incisive analysis.

Yvonne Rainer's film *Murder and Murder*, in its final half, places living with breast cancer within the context of pharmaceutical multi-nationals and environmental suicide. The politics surrounding the relegation of AIDS to yet another sinister aspect of our paranoiac Zeitgeist as we all move toward the Almighty Millennium need to be placed under some very observant microscopes. AIDS cannot be absorbed into some generalized mainstream because, like everything else involving individual bodies, it is both too convoluted and particular.

As it is easier to refer to a "film festival" rather than a "film and video festival," it is also less of a mouthful to say "Queer" rather than lesbian and gay. "Queer" is a word that can and has worked to cut across falsely assumed demarcations — between men and women and between bisexuals, transsexuals, polymorphs and strictly fags and dykes. "Queer" can and has been an inclusionary rather than exclusionary word. However, "Queer" can also be an exclusionary word not unlike "community." In the eyes and minds of some pundits and

QUEERNESS, INSIDE AND OUTSIDE

Maude, Ryan Drew Mellon, USA, 1996, video, 4 min. Photo: courtesy the artist.



I Shall Not Be Removed: The Life of Marlon Riggs, Karen Everett, USA, 1996, video, 57 min. Photo: California Newsreel.

perhaps tastemakers there are Queers and then there are those who are merely gay. "Queer" can and has effectively problematized absolute, essentialist sexualities. It can also refer to mindsets quite at odds with bodies, and as well to performance. It may not mean all that much to gay men living and dealing with HIV disease in their bodies and then in their minds. Much of the "Queerness" I enjoyed throughout the festival was irreverent—film and video producers offered flippantly "Queer" polaroids and even documentaries that showcased subjects that became downright Queer when viewed through perverted lenses. AIDS does not always lend itself to polyesterish campiness: it is a body thing.

But then many audiences are tired of depressing subjects like AIDS (and hate literature and its proponents and censorship and Queer bashing and racism and classism, etc.). Audiences themselves mirror communities (although they should hopefully problematize definitions of fixed communities who like this and who don't go for that). Some of the works that remain with me after the festival are those problematizing notions of "community." The 1997 festival specifically included young and old Queers in their programming and their imageries.

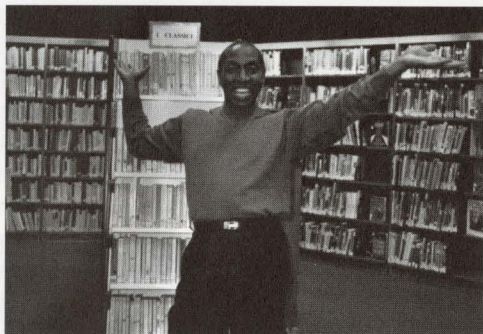
I would have preferred that the *Out at Work* programme did not run concurrently to the *Young Queer Rebels* programme that I attended and enjoyed. Many of the Queerest people on the planet earth have to "keep a lid on it" when they go to work, and this is especially applicable to youths who are just beginning to define themselves with regard to their sexual practices. Youth and the employed are hardly oppositional, and the *Out at Work* programme itself acknowledged this. Therefore, this was a particularly difficult programme selection choice for this viewer. To its credit, the festival included a Queer music programme that itself addressed many young Queer concerns and provided space for youths who feel alternatively contemptuous and intimidated by "mainstream" gay culture and its dominant "community." To be a world-class Queer festival one has to acknowledge that a lot of very Queer business happens outside the officially designated ghettos.

Another work that haunted me was Arthur Dong's *Licensed to Kill* documentary revealing seven Queer bashers and even Queer killers all speaking to the filmmaker from prison. One inmate particularly chilled me. A man whose religion forbade him to "come out" was also a compulsive park-sex practitioner who, upon learning his positive HIV status, decided to exact revenge on all the homos responsible for his illness. This gentleman for me represented an extreme instance as one who is and is not a part of "the community." He went looking for action in a park that enjoyed a notoriety—that is and is not a Queer space. Needless to say, many cities and even (maybe especially) small towns have these spaces that are Queer one minute and not the next—just like this particular killer himself. On my way home a bus was taking too long to arrive and I was frightened by the appearance of one particular approaching pedestrian. I had just seen *Licensed to Kill*.

Inside Out hopefully will continue to grow and exhibit works such as these and others that challenge and disturb as well as gratify. I would like to see even stronger curatorial presence, and less of a binarism between local, short, and cheesy shorts versus serious international features. I realize that all too often programmers have to work with what is available and that means what gets made in the first place. I would have appreciated some work from Quebec and more from the First Nations of Canada; but I realize there are reasons for these omissions involving distributors as well as more fundamental funding and access issues. So, congratulations to all involved and may 1998 be even sharper, more incisive, and yes, funny.

Andrew James Paterson is an interdisciplinary artist who works in video, performance, fictional and critical writing, and musical composition. He is Queer and he is the chairperson of the Time-based committee for YYY Artist's Outlet.

An Illustrated History of Western Music, Dennis Day, Canada, 1997, video, 12 min. Photo: courtesy V Tape.



Out At Work, Kelly Anderson & Tami Gold, USA, 1996, 16mm, 55 min. Photo: courtesy AndersonGold Films.

Gisele Amantea
Dead Letters
to March 28

Michael Balser
Treatments: Adventures in AIDS & Media
to March 28

Germaine Koh
Notices
April 8 - May 23

Su Rynard
Eight Men Called Eugene
April 8 - May 23

Alain Paiement
de la place du marché
June 3 - July 25

Lost, Lonely and Vicious II
The Regular 8 Faction
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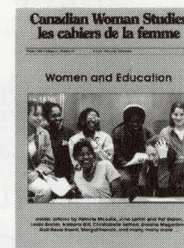


canadian woman studies
les cahiers de la femme

Women and Education

Volume 17, Number 4 (Winter 1998)

In this issue, women as teachers, writers, activists, and students address the barriers to equitable education which continue to exist for women and girls and promote a transformative model of education that is women and girl-inclusive. The issue highlights the need to open the pathways to education for all women, not only those enrolled in formal schooling, and provides strategies related to reconceptualizing pedagogy and equity beyond the parameters of traditional male-focused learning. This issue is an indispensable resource for those involved in educational studies, women's studies, and sociology, as well as being fascinating reading for women everywhere!



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Albert Johnson

On August 26, 1979 the Police received an anonymous call about a disturbance being created by Albert Johnson.

P.C. Inglis and Cargnelli drove to the lane at the rear of Johnson's residence. At the sight of the Officers Johnson became frustrated and cursed the Officers. Johnson felt that the Police were unjustly harassing him, as he felt they had before. Johnson entered his house.

P.C. Inglis and Cargnelli entered the house. Even though they found a casual domestic scene in the house, they decided to arrest Johnson for causing a disturbance, in order to protect his family. Johnson refused to go with them. An altercation began. Police claimed that Johnson threw a pot of peas cooking on the stove. A witness claimed that the pot fell during the struggle between Johnson and the Police. Johnson freed himself and ran upstairs. The Police stayed downstairs.

The Police Officers claimed that Johnson came down the stairs carrying what they believed to be an axe, but turned out to be a lawn-edger. Their story went on to say that P.C. Inglis shot at Johnson, but missed. Johnson then jumped down the stairs; Inglis shot again, but didn't miss.

Another witness claimed Johnson came down the stairs and was kneeling when Inglis shot him. The forensic Investigation supported this evidence. Inglis and Cargnelli were charged with manslaughter.

They were acquitted.



Sophia Cook

On October 27, 1989, Sophia Cook, a Black Jamaican woman, was shot by P.C. Durham. Cook was in the passenger side of a stolen car when Durham stopped the car.

Durham approached the car and spoke to the driver of the car, Anthony Mcleoad. Mcleoad claimed that at this point Durham realized that the car was stolen, unholstered his gun and told the occupant of the car "Don't make my day." Mcleoad and the other men in the car jumped out and ran.

Cook, who was unaware that the car was stolen, also tried to run but was grabbed by the shoulder. When Durham grabbed Cook his revolver was fired, shooting Cook. Cook was left permanently paralyzed. Durham was charged with careless use of a firearm.

He was acquitted.

To Knit the Country with Iron Bars

ART AND POLITICS

IN CONTEMPORARY TURKEY

by Deborah Root

I recently returned from a year in Ankara, where I worked in an art department of a Turkish university. Because of my personal dislocation, it sometimes became difficult to remember the difference between “here” and “there.” As a result, many of the certainties I had taken for granted in Canada went into flux. In particular, issues of postmodernity that many of us take for granted in North America seem less relevant in Turkey, in part because modernity and its consequences remain open sites of contestation. I was struck both by the magnitude of the modernization and westernization project that has characterized the Turkish republic since its inception in the 1920s, and the extent to which this project has gone hand in hand with the suppression of dissent and cultural criticism. Because both politics and art in Turkey tends to be framed through the opposition of modernity and premodernity, I had to begin to think through the links among modernism, displacement and representations of violence.



Leaden Sleep, Selim Birsel, site-specific installation for “Gar,” 1995.

One of the issues in Turkish contemporary art concerns the difficulty in representing political space, which has a great deal to do with the repressive political climate of the country. I became interested in the differences and similarities in cultural production between Turkey and Canada. In many ways, everyday life is easier in Canada, but the price seems to be a kind of psychic isolation, and, for many, an experience of political impossibility. In Turkey, political violence exists more on the surface of everyday life, and everyone knows what goes on behind the closed doors of police stations and prisons. Violence tends to be political rather than personal, yet there is very little street crime. Turkey is characterized by massive human rights violations. It has the second largest army in NATO. Censorship is everywhere. It is extremely difficult to criticize these things. If to speak explicitly about state authority is dangerous, how do artists and writers address issues of violence and power?

It is important to remember that the repressive nature of the Turkish state is right out there for everyone to see, as opposed to the situation in Canada where authority certainly exists but can appear more displaced (there are many exceptions to this generalization: for instance Parkdale, where I live, is characterized by heavy police presence). In the face of regular military coups, it becomes more difficult for people to fool themselves into thinking the state is benign. There is in fact a price for speaking out that we usually do not see here. But how to talk about it? It can be difficult for outsiders to notice cultural and political nuances, and I am sure that living through the periodic upheavals that characterize Turkish politics is quite different from hearing about them. Yet even a visitor becomes quickly aware of the presence and weight of the army: the generals can do what they want, and, again, everyone knows this.

Representing Authority

As a way of exploring the relation between art, violence and political expression I want to return to Ankara to talk about an exhibition of contemporary art that went up in the Ankara railway station in May 1995. The works in this show alluded, sometimes explicitly, to questions of violence, nationalism and state power in Turkey. The show was shut down by the authorities after two days, and I think it is possible to say that they understood the work all too well. The title of the show was "Gar," or train station, and accordingly the organizers sought to focus on issues of transit—how repression migrates from site to site, how violence travels from one place to the next. The links among different sites are there—new buildings, burning of villages, army coups, trains filled with soldiers heading off to Kurdistan, homeless people, torture, people being thrown off their land, Benetton and BMW—and the artists exhibiting in "Gar" had to find a way to address these volatile issues in a way that opened up such linkages for the viewer.

Political and historical ambiguities were stressed in all the works for more than one reason—first, at least in theory, fluctuations of possible meaning can help the artist get away with making political points that would otherwise be too dangerous (although this did not work for "Gar" to the extent that the artists hoped), and second, the ambiguity of the work helps the viewer move from site to site. The work was clearly recognized as subversive by the officials who closed the show, but, according to the organizers, the primary criterion used to define that danger was that the works had "varied messages" and that such ambiguities were potentially politically suspect. The closing of the "Gar" exhibition is, I think, symptomatic of a particular anxiety about the equivocal nature of images on the part of the bureaucrats of the modernist Turkish state.

Turkish politics can be difficult to untangle, but it seems evident that the Turkish state is extremely repressive, torture is widespread, and a civil war is occurring in eastern Turkey between the army and the Kurdish population, as represented to a greater or lesser degree by the PKK, or Kurdish Worker's Party. In eastern Anatolia, Kurdish villagers seem to be faced with the choice of sending their sons to the Turkish army or sending them to the PKK. They generally pick the PKK, but it is difficult to know what kinds of pressures are brought to bear. It seems that the army or elements within the army—no one knows exactly which—operates death squads in Kurdish territory. The so-called security forces seem to be a law unto themselves and regular reports of atrocities trickle out of the east. Certainly, the Turkish army is burning villages in the east and refugees are flooding the larger cities like Istanbul and Ankara. Artists and writers face particular problems. It is against the law to say that the Kurds (or any other national group) are a distinct society; it is illegal to call into question the unity of the Turkish state. For example, a publisher was recently jailed for disseminating a piece that merely raised the ques-

tion of Kurdish sovereignty. The generals say that they're winning the war, but they've been saying this for years, and some people believe that they want the war to continue because there's so much money to be made out of it. There is in fact a great deal of secrecy around what precisely is going on and about what kinds of deals are being struck.

Although some newspapers criticize the government, on the whole the media support the army and the operations against the Kurds. Just before the "Gar" show opened 30,000 soldiers were sent east from the Ankara train station to the cry of "Bravo Turkish Rambos" from the press. The point is that only the official government line is permitted to be part of public discourse, although people can talk around the edges of this (even in the public arena), if they're extremely careful not to question the centralist basis of the Turkey republic.

Western Displacements

Before I directly address the "Gar" show and the representation of the modernist agenda of the Turkish republic, I would like to frame my discussion through the North American context. During my time in Turkey, I thought a great deal about political violence and the differences between what I was experiencing in Ankara and my life in North America. I was struck by the extent to which representations of violence in North American popular culture present it as something that pertains to personal psychology of the individual. Even representation of "crime" tends to be individualized. This has an effect on how people here understand other kinds of violence, for instance political or social; the way people talk about or represent violence in one place silences or makes it difficult to recognize the existence of violence in other places.

The representation of violence as something individual would seem to function as a kind of alibi for what we can still call political violence, although here this violence is more displaced than in countries like Turkey. I have always tended to link the representation and repetition of violent images in culture to the agendas of the imperial state, but what does it mean to speak of "the imperial state" in these days of multinational capital and globalization? I think the discursive displacement of violence onto former colonies continues to be an issue, but in a way that is less explicitly colonialist than fifty or hundred years ago. There are still plenty of representations of other cultures as violent and incomprehensible, but we're also seeing more and more images of violence and death occurring within mainstream, North American culture.

Most people in North America see images of violently dead bodies or traces of dead bodies in the form of representation—on television, in the movies, in the newspaper photographs, sometimes in advertising, sometimes in art. To the extent that these images are served up to us as ready-made, commodified images, they produce a kind of

equivalence or exchange value between the events and people they display (although the dead bodies we see on our screens tend to be female or black or brown). Because there are so many of them, the dead bodies seem to be interchangeable, and the reasons for the deaths at some level appear meaningless. TV violence usually appears as a disarticulated assemblage of individualized acts: the crazy person, the drug dealer, the cop does something and people die. Because the viewer's attention is directed to discrete, individual motivations violence becomes something abstracted from space and time, cause and effect in the social and political world.

In North America, at least in terms of popular culture, there seems to be an elision of the way that image production of dead bodies is linked to real dead bodies, and to systems of power, to the state, to the control of territory, and to continuing agendas of what I think we can still call empire, now deployed through the movements of multinational capital. In both mass culture and high culture, images of violence tend to be abstracted from the political ground, and as such appear in a commodified form. As a commodity, an image of a dead body is designed to produce intensity that would seem to have nothing to do with the society in which it circulates.

When I talk about abstraction and commodification, I'm referring to the way images appear as fragments, unconnected to any social or territorial ground. As fragments the images become available for consumption, and each fragment can be selected as one selects a lipstick. There is a link between consumption and violence in the way both operate through fragmentation and abstraction. In several texts, Georges Bataille wrote about the function of violence in capitalist society. According to Bataille, violence (or heterogeneity) is able to break through the flatness of bourgeois culture because, for a moment, it produces conditions of the possible. Or to put it a bit differently, violence creates the illusion that anything can happen. Affect is produced and people feel like there is in fact something happening in their lives. As I see it, a central problem for contemporary mass culture is that this affect has no place to go because it is abstracted from the ground of the society in which it is occurring. So the only thing to be done is to raise the threshold, and produce increasingly intense images.

If violence can be imagined as a spatial issue, we can complicate our understanding of power, so that violence



Claude Leon, PVC pipe & mirrors, site-specific installation for "Gar," 1995.



isn't just something that some people do to other people, but an event that occurs in space, at different sites. In other words, I want to return to the ground of political action. Thinking about images of violence, on TV or elsewhere, can end up being a substitute for thinking about real violence. Dead bodies on television and dead bodies in the world would seem to be two different kinds of things, but for TV violence to "work," it must evoke some notion of real violence (we can't recognize an image as "violent" without having some idea of what real violence is). The issue is the conception of violence, and how it links up to space in the world. If TV violence is in fact a kind of violence, but one that is decontextualized through a process of abstraction and fragmentation, then

conceptions of "real" violence can be decontextualized as well. When we see dead bodies on television, doesn't the image risk skewing our ideas of what real dead bodies are? Or to put the question differently, what is the relation of fantasy violence to the real, even at the level of the image?

It is possible to resituate an image of violence in relation to the real contexts that subtend real violence by thinking about space, which is to say, the different sites where violence occurs. Violence occurs in space, war is about land and territory, "development" has to do with the appropriation of space, and the problem with TV violence is that the events that are represented are not situated in real space.

Resituating Violence

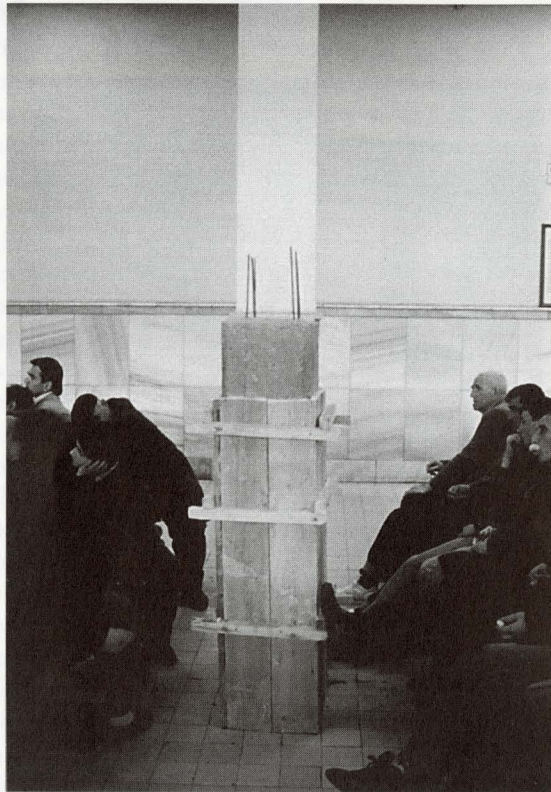
The "Gar" show sought to resituate events both in space and in the ongoing story of the Turkish republic. Organized by Selim Birsel, Claude Leon and Vahap Avşar under the theme of "Art and Taboos," twelve artists were invited to participate, some of whom were Turkish and some European. All had changed their nationality or country of residence at

some point in their lives. The organizers decided on the Ankara train station as a venue for several reasons: as I noted above, they wanted to focus on the idea of transit; they wanted a broader context for contemporary art in Turkey than the usual small, private galleries; they hoped to explore the links between public space and cultural production, a relatively new idea in Turkey; and they wanted to comment on the railroad system in the context of the development of the Turkish state.

To contextualize this focus it is helpful to briefly review Turkish history, particularly the dominant conception of modernity and globalization. Until relatively recently Turkey controlled a vast empire, ruled by Ottoman sultans until 1923. Although Anatolia proper was never colonized by European powers, the Ottoman Empire experienced a loss of territory over the course of the nineteenth century, culminating in foreign invasion after World War I. For many intellectuals, the decline in Ottoman power was the result of an Eastern (specifically Islamic, Arab, Persian, village) substratum of Turkish society. This gave rise to a strong drive to westernize the country. After the Turkish Republic was declared in the 1920s, Kemal Atatürk embarked on a massive program of westernization. Think about it: almost overnight, Atatürk secularized the country, changed the language, changed the script, changed the calendar, changed the clothes, made people adopt surnames for the first time. Museums were erected to house displays of "backward" customs such as Sufi ritual. Public buildings went up, and the establishment of a railway system was key to the modernization project: Atatürk said: "we knit the country with iron bars," meaning the country was unified by the railroads. In the 1950s, however, American business interests encouraged the state to shift to highways and buses, so now railways are used mostly by poor, working-class people and people from the countryside. Turkish soldiers also take the trains on their way to the east to fight in the ongoing Kurdish war.

Today the country is polarized precisely around the question of westernization: many embrace globalization and Turkey's entrance into an international cultural and economic system, and others resist this, generally in the name of Islam. Turkish society is changing fast. Western Turkey is rich, and factories work day and night to pump

out textiles, furniture, appliances, and other goods. The powerful Turkish mafia takes a substantial cut from the drugs flowing through Istanbul to Europe, and from the arms coming in from the former eastern bloc and ending up who knows where. In an act many feel to be instigated by the military, the Turkish supreme court recently banned the democratically elected Islamicist Welfare party. Atatürk's project of westernization and modernization continues, although it now takes somewhat different forms and it did in the 1920s. Massive construction projects are everywhere, and apartment block after apartment block goes up daily. Foreign consumer goods are everywhere and increasingly overwhelm the local products that are better and less expensive. I taught at a university for rich kids, not the best university in the country but probably the most expensive. Students were very interested in displaying tokens of westernization, from Versace jeans to BMWs to cell phones. And, as elsewhere, art can be another status symbol.



Aydan Mürtezoğlu, concrete, steel and wood, "Gar," 1995.

Contemporary art tends to be an elite concern in Turkey. Partially for this reason, the "Gar" artists wanted to exhibit work in a place where it is normally not seen—a train station—and to begin to call into question the elitism of contemporary art in Turkey. To a North American used to work that explicitly addresses issues of power and privilege, the "Gar" show can seem fairly tame, but the responses to the work make it clear that such issues remain highly charged. On the whole, the art scene in Turkey is not the most obvious site of resistance to political repression, which is one thing that made "Gar" interesting. Class divisions in Turkey are rigidly marked, and people who think about international contemporary art have very different interests from people who are thinking about survival. This is not peculiar to Turkey, nor is the fact that most artists are extremely privileged. But there is more to it than that. Artists who wish to call into question the status quo remember that there are real penalties for speaking out, if it is even possible to find a venue to exhibit such work. There is not a great deal of overtly political art in Turkey for the simple reason that it can't get shown. In particular, artists cannot display work that openly addresses the Kurdish situation. The arts community in Ankara is what one might expect from a medium-sized government town—although some artists are happy where they are, many hope to move up to

the Istanbul scene or beyond. This is complicated by the position of Turkey vis-à-vis the international art world. The sense of being outside the international scene experienced by some artists can have a flattening effect, as there is a tendency to first look over shoulders to see what is being done elsewhere. Although a larger center such as Istanbul is undoubtedly more culturally "open" than Ankara or elsewhere in Turkey, the "Gar" show probably would have been shut down there as well.

One of the most interesting works in the show was an installation by Turkish artist Selim Bırsel, entitled *Leaden Sleep*. This work consisted of ten life-sized blanket covered figures molded out of paper and graphite, some of which he constructed on site, using actors. These were lined up on the train platform. If you looked closely, the figures were arranged in sleeping positions (rather than as dead bodies), but they were entirely covered by the blankets, like corpses, people shot at a demonstration, perhaps, or Kurdish villagers. They also resembled the sleeping homeless who crowd the larger cities. The title too referred to this ambiguity, with the word "leaden" (this works in both Turkish and English) reminding us of what bullets are made of. This piece caused the greatest uproar, as it was seen by soldiers heading east through the Ankara train station, and interpreted by them and others as PKK guerrillas killed by the Turkish army.

Similarly, the ambiguity of Vahap Avsar's installation was read as a critique of the Kurdish war and used as a reason to close the show. Avsar displayed several plastic containers filled with red liquid, which was in fact the dye used to color wedding drinks in country villages. One of the points of the piece was the way traditional culture comes to be contained within the trappings of modernity. The director of Turkish railways saw the red liquid as the blood of PKK guerrillas, and perhaps also as a reference to the destruction of the Eastern villages, and of the village way of life by the modernization projects.

A piece by Dutch artist Paul Donker Duyvis, entitled *Whispers from the Well of Wisdom*, showed seven watering cans arranged with the spouts facing outward. Each can contained a tape recorder, and different voices whispered to one another in the different languages that exist in Turkey, such as Kurdish, Turkoman, Azerbaijani, Farsi, as well as standard Turkish. Duyvis was referring to a statement by former president Tansu Ciller, who said that "Turkey is a great mosaic," and reminded us that, despite such official statements, all these languages (except for standard Turkish) have been suppressed in the name of Turkish nationalism. The artist was questioning the basis of the Turkish republic, which has insisted on a standard "Turkish" culture as the norm, but in a way that contradicts historical reality. For instance, army trainers tell recruits that Kurds are in fact Turks who have lost their language.

Ladan Shahrokh Naderi, an Iranian artist living in Paris, also addressed the silencing of diversity. Her installation,

Ali, showed a mattress covered with a military blanket embroidered with the name Ali in Persian script. The mattress was placed in a darkened room and underneath the blanket there is a telephone. Periodically the telephone rings and eventually someone picks up and a voice inquires: "Ali?" There is a large population of Alawites in Turkey, a Shi'ite religious minority that follows Ali, the son-in-law of the prophet Mohammed. In the last few years, there have been increasingly violent attacks against Alawites both by nationalist gangs and by the police. In Turkey, Alawites have historically supported liberal or socialist elements, and for this reason the ultra-right Turkish nationalist movement has particularly targeted Alawites. Naderi reminded us that despite the pressures against this population, people speak to one another.

Claude Leon, a French artist living in Ankara, made sixteen periscopes out of drainage pipes and placed them at different points in the train station. They were designed to blend into the background. A mirror was placed in the top part of the periscope, so that when you look into it you see your own face. In North America the big brother metaphor can seem a bit clichéd, but Turkey is a very different situation, with high levels of surveillance, censorship and self-censorship. These periscopes were particularly disturbing to working-class train passengers, and were vandalized during their construction because passengers believed that they were in fact radar or surveillance devices. Interestingly, the officials who closed the show did not have a problem with this work, the idea seeming to be that if the public fears surveillance it is more likely to behave.

The show also linked issues of political violence and nationalism to agendas of modernization and the global economy. Istanbul artist Aydan Mürtezoğlu built reinforced concrete pillars like those used in construction sites to refer to the building projects everywhere in Turkey and to Atatürk's "iron bars" of the railway system. Construction projects reflect the increasing urbanization of Turkey as people leave the land for the squatter districts of the cities. Iron bars also refer to prisons, and the spectator is able to recognize connections between the statist agenda of modernization and political repression. In this way the meaning of the piece is able to shift from site to site—sometimes railroads, sometimes construction, sometimes prisons—but this meaning always referred to something occurring on the ground.

The organizers of the show were initially most concerned with the potential reaction to Paolo Vitali's piece, which consisted of large banners printed with verses from the Qu'ran in German. Because of the large Islamicist movement in Turkey, Islam is a touchy subject both for the secularist supporters of the military and the people who embrace Islam. Vitali wanted to remind viewers of the huge Turkish population of *Gastarbeiders* in Germany, most of whom are what middle-class Turks disparagingly refer to as "peasants." Because country people tend to use the railroads, Vitali



thought it likely that some passengers would be former *Gastarbeiters* able to read the German text. The organizers were surprised when the piece elicited animated discussion from rail passengers but no unease on the part of officialdom.

The show was closed after two days, ostensibly by the Director of Railroads although it is likely that the decision came from elsewhere. The artists were told that the "messages in some of the works in the public spaces are varied and that this would cause problems," as reported by Vahap Avşar. When the artists went to the train station a couple of hours after they received notification of the closing they found that the works had already been dismantled and in several cases damaged. There was some protest around the closing of the show, both on the part of the artists and an official from the Ministry of Culture who spoke out against the decision, but once the decision had been made it apparently was impossible to shift. In retrospect, the organizers make the point that, both with respect to getting permission to mount *"Gar"* and the decision to close the show, it was not possible to negotiate with officials—they said either yes or no and that was that. No explanation, no dialogue. The artists were struck by the seamlessness of what Vahap Avşar calls a "conspiracy," which is to say, a refusal to engage with the artists or to inquire about the intentions of the work or even to recognize that ambiguity has a place in contemporary practice.

It seemed to be the ambiguity of the work that most disturbed officials, especially those pieces that could be

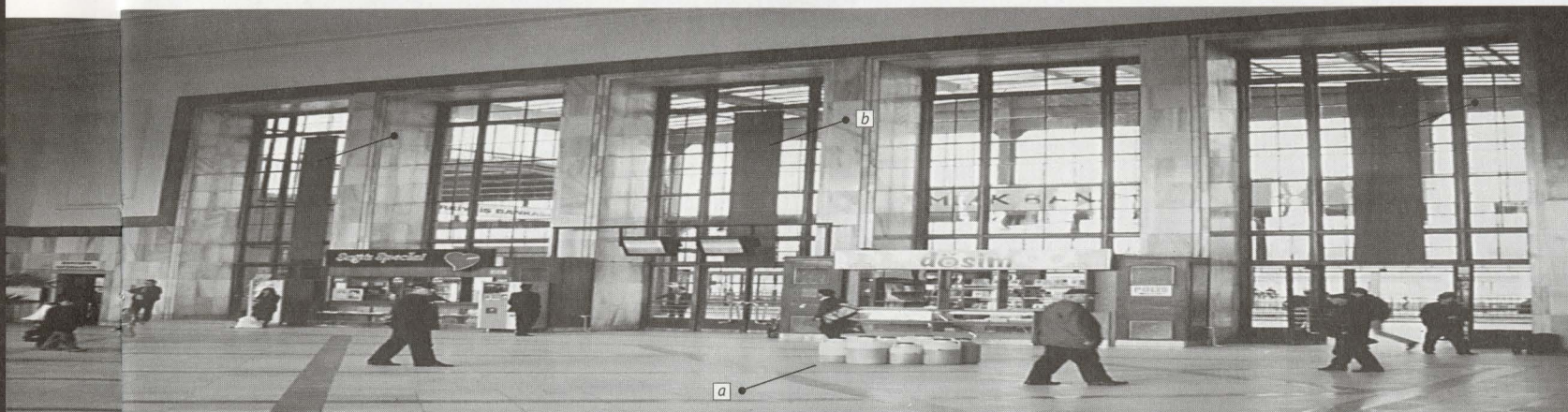
construed as having as their subject the Kurdish situation. You do occasionally see images of political violence in the news, but these are framed in such a way that the message directed to the viewer is extremely clear. Rather than being individualized in the North American style, violence is framed within a rhetoric of "terrorism." For example, reports of PKK suicide bombings appear on Turkish television, but the cameras remain focused on bloody, fragmented body bits during the entire report. This seems to be a strategy to generate fear and hatred of the PKK and make it difficult for people to think clearly. I watched one report with Turkish friends who are highly critical of the government's war against the Kurds, but we all responded emotionally to the bloody image on the screen. The image erased the politics.

Back to Canada

What is it possible to learn from *"Gar"*? I talked earlier about resituating violence in space. The artists who participated in the show were attempting to show the different ways space can be filled, and the ways these different sites are linked through regimes of violence and authority. Over here we have a nice new building, over there we have an empty village, in another place we see some dead bodies; these are not discrete events, but occur in relation to each other. So instead of imagining power simply as something that is deployed from above, the viewer is able to understand that

a. Vahap Avşar, plastic containers, dyed water, *"Gar,"* 1995.

b. Paolo Vitali, three banners with verse from the Qu'ran in German.



it also has particular kinds of effects, effects that occur in space and change the way this space is occupied. In this way the artists go "under the surface" of repression to show the links between the different sites in which different violences occur. The spectator can leave the show and make further connections.

A point to keep in mind is that the allusions to violence, death and repression in *"Gar"* all referred to social and political realities, in other words to events taking place on the ground of everyday life. The artists are well aware of the problems of history and modernity that tend to be elided in centers of discursive authority. Because the images were connected to the political ground, the viewer of the work has someplace to go conceptually. The shifting meanings of the work make it possible to see the connections between different kinds of phenomena, and to understand politics in a way that takes into account ambiguities. In this way, sleep becomes death, a wedding drink becomes blood, and vice versa. Politically speaking, the artists are generally quite clear about the linkages between different modes of silence, the various agendas of the Turkish state and the consequences of those agendas.

This is very different from the way images of violence circulate in American-based mass culture (which incidentally has become widely available in Turkey), where death tends to appear as something abstract, something that exists for its own sake, to distract us from the politics of daily life. Images of violence and death function as a kind of spectacle and as such have to do with display: display of mastery, sometimes display of white or male supremacies, or of American military power. Again, the affect produced by the dead bodies draws our attention to the story we are being told, and draws our attention away from other stories. There are links between an image of someone getting shot on a cop show and, say, homeless people dead of exposure, closed hospitals, suicides, and empty villages in the Maritimes, but it can be difficult to grasp what precisely

those links are and how they work. For many of us there is no longer a map.

"Gar" also reveals things that some would prefer to remain hidden, both in Turkey and in the West: the great modernization projects that have made Turkey (and other places) wealthy have a price. In this way, the artists address what are ultimately international issues, and make the point that there are linkages among development, land and the global economy, the destruction of village economies, and American mass culture and commodity production.

What can be missing here in Canada is precisely this sense of transit, the movement from one site to another, politics, land, who builds what where, how people inhabit territory. Part of this has to do with the way community is constructed—or not—in Canada. Whereas in Turkey some communities construct themselves in terms of class, others do so in terms of their grasp of political repression. In a country like Turkey, where political repression works on the surface of daily life, politics becomes a matter of affiliation rather than blindness and denial. The government works by secrecy and misdirection, but certain basics of the political situation are clear to everyone. The state is corrupt—this is taken for granted. The state is repressive—some say this is a good and necessary thing, others resist this, but everyone agrees that this is so. Nationalism means dead bodies; again there are many on the right who think this is all to the good. But the problem that so many of us seem to have in North America with finding a political language is much less of an issue in Turkey—the question is what is it possible to do about things.

As always, the question of political action remains. Although the work in *"Gar"* is generally quite sobering, the artists are careful to remind us that, regardless of repression, voices continue to whisper to one another, things are being said under the blanket, and someone does eventually answer the phone.

Deborah Root is a Toronto-based writer and critic.

caw caw caw caw

bosho. Where're you from. Up the river, heavy load eh.
yeah take a break. have some tea. give
your feet a rest.

COMMERCE. COMMERCE AND TRADE. A NATION IS
BUILT UPON A FOUNDATION OF COMMERCE AND
TRADE. BANKS. BANKS ARE THE PILLAR OF
PROSPERITY. PROSPERITY LEADS TO PROGRESS



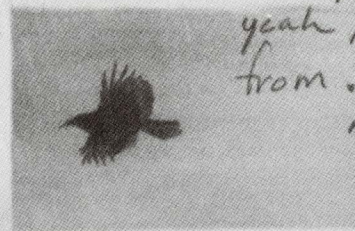
hey lady, spare a quarter. tanks,
god bless. how you been. Seen Ralph? Hey
how are ya here's Cathy. Got the
bottle. Party time eh.

COMMERCE. WE ARE TALKING COMMERCE AND TRADE
GET A MOVE ON. YOU CAN'T LOITER HERE. YOU
HEAR ME. GET A MOVE ON. THIS ISN'T YOUR
CORNER. GET A JOB. GODDAMN DRUNKS.

you been here long, a few
centuries eh. hey mister,
Spare some change. nice
day. hey gotta schmoke. gotta light. Fuck, my
shoes fallin' 'part. Ah' dere's a few miles
in 'em yet. Gotta quarter.
Call home. Call collect.

COMMERCE IS IMPERIAL. IMPERIAL BANK OF COMMERSE.
INTEREST RATES ARE DOWN. TIME TO INVEST. THIS
NEIGHBOURHOOD NEEDS INVESTMENT. LOOK AT THOSE
DAMN DRUNKS OUT THERE. PATHETIC.

you butcha money. Fuck its
cold. Gotta get warm. hey
buddy, spare some change.
yeah, yeah. where're you
from. home's where I lay
my head.



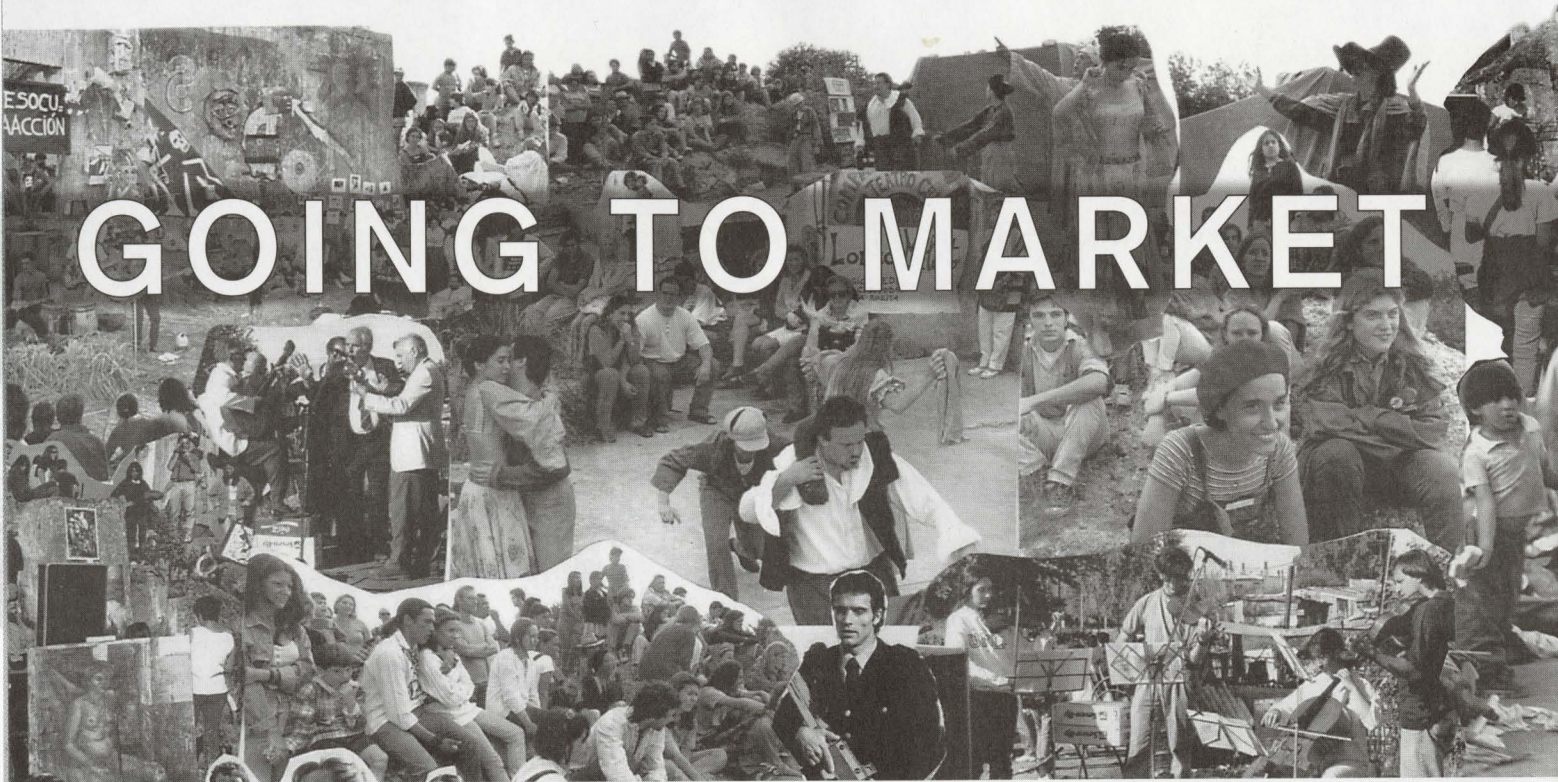
COMMERCE. THIS NEIGHBOURHOOD
LACKS COMMERCE. BUMS. GODDAMN
BUMS OUT THERE. FORECLOSE THE
LOANS. FORECLOSE THE BANK. NO
DEPOSITS. NO RETURNS! CLOSE
THE ACCOUNTS.

eh, its still a
meeting place. inside
too now. see Ralph.
yeah cathy's around
somewhere bosho. hey
buddy, spare a buck



caw caw caw caw

GOING TO MARKET



ART AND COMMUNITY IN ARGENTINA



by Karl Beveridge

The international airport in Buenos Aires, a city of fourteen million, isn't much bigger than Vancouver's. All major traffic stops in Buenos Aires and then returns to where it came from. There are similarities between Argentina and Canada but the differences make comparisons difficult. Argentina is also deceiving to the visitor. Still one of the relatively wealthier countries in Latin America, it's also the most European. Buenos Aires is modeled on Paris. Only the scattered Miserias give it away. But the city looks very tired. There's little money to keep up appearances, except for the wealthy neighbourhoods. The new Puerto Madero rivals Manhattan's Upper East Side and makes Toronto's Hazelton Lanes look like a neighbourhood convenience store. The rest of the city concentrates on survival.

This was my second trip to Buenos Aires. It was prompted by an Argentinean professor who was intent on setting up a labour arts festival in Buenos Aires modeled on the Mayworks festivals in Toronto and Vancouver. The second trip was made in order to participate in the first "Festival de Arte y Trabajo" (Festival of Art and Work) that was being held in November 1995.

Festival de Arte y Trabajo

The *Festival* included a range of activities from exhibitions to concerts and performances. It is the exhibitions, however, that I will focus on as they encapsulate what the *Festival*

represented.¹ The festival was primarily financed by the labour movement, in particular the union of building maintenance workers, FATERYH. Small amounts were received from other sources for particular projects. The only public funding came from the municipality of Buenos Aires, which helped sponsor two of the performance events.

The opening of the "Festival de Arte y Trabajo" was held at the FATERYH trade union education centre, SUTERH. You entered the building off a small back street in downtown Buenos Aires. Once in, however, it was impressive. More of what you'd expect of a public institution than a trade union hall. People were milling about in the reception area occasionally looking at the paintings on the wall. In the basement, workers were learning to install and repair bathroom fixtures. Upstairs, others were learning basic computer skills. Out back, a group of children of union members were getting ready to go off to the union summer camp. The centre functioned on many levels integrating education, culture, recreation and union activities in one place, creating a larger social and cultural identity for its members. I soon learned that most unions have similar concert hall, theatre, recreation and education centres.

The opening finally got underway. The speeches made the usual welcomes and pledges of greater things to come from union leaders and festival organizers while people sipped Coca Cola. The first of the three major art exhibitions organized for the *Festival* was held in the main reception area. It included work that ranged from a brooding social realism to a more contemporary painterly modernism. A not unchallenging and reasonably accomplished exhibition. The images

dealt with various political themes, from the environment to identity. Few dealt directly with labour. What struck me most, however, was that the intentions were undermined by the small size of the works—nothing was much larger than 50cm x 60cm. The compositions, gestures and devices used by the artists were derived from larger-scale Euro-American work. This was true of the work in the other *Festival* exhibitions and seemed to be more about a scale of economy than of aesthetics.

The second exhibition, "Encuentro de Arte y Trabajo" (The Encounter of Art and Work), was held at the head office of the *Confederación General del Trabajo de la República Argentina* (CGT). The CGT is the major trade union federation in Argentina, the equivalent of the Canadian Labour Congress. The building looks like it was built in the 1940s. It was modern for its time. The area, near the waterfront, felt deserted. Security guards checked you as you entered the building. It was a very important event that signaled official, top-level, labour support for the festival. The exhibition was in a large oak-paneled room on the main floor. Many of the works were displayed on easels placed around the room. It felt lush and tasteful. Wine was served along with the opening speeches.

Few of the works in the exhibition had any overt political content although some depicted work and industrial landscapes. Much of it was a kind of post-World War II representational modernism. Most of the artists were in mid-career and seldom had the opportunity to exhibit together. Most had full-time or several part-time jobs. The organizer, for example, is a community worker in the poor

Todos o Ninguno [All or No One], a performance organized by Grupo Escombros, 1995, in La Plata, Argentina. The event involved 300 artists and was part of the "Festival de Arte y Trabajo."

working-class barrio of Boca, from which several other artists came. Their interest in exhibiting in the union hall had more to do with a sense of social solidarity than with the particular content of the work. In part, it attests to the social position and acceptance that unions have in Argentinean society.

The third exhibition, "Sin Pan y sin Trabajo" (Without Bread and Work), took place at the cultural centre of the *Congreso de los Trabajadores Argentinos* (CTA). The CTA is a left-wing breakaway from the CGT. It represents workers in the public services and media for the most part. The building might have been a small neighbourhood theatre at one time. In its appearance it is not as fancy as the other sites, but the CTA is a new federation.

The exhibition's title was borrowed from a classic Argentinean realist painting of 1884. It depicts a starving worker's family looking out at a closed factory. Keeping with the spirit of the exhibition's title, much of the work was very heavy duty, the opposite of the work at the CGT. The artists took their depiction of oppression and militant protest very seriously. The paintings were dark and somber. Most of the artists were in their '60s or older and many had been associated with the Communist Party.²

The exhibitions at the CGT and the CTA certainly reflected a different politic, both in cultural and social terms. The two exhibitions, combined, presented the work of ninety-three artists. Not one artist was in both exhibitions. While the CTA artists would see themselves as activists whose work supports the political agenda of the movement, the CGT (and SUTERH) artists would see themselves as



500,000 people before the presidential palace in Buenos Aires, 1949; President Juan D. Perón and Eva Perón.

working in alliance with the movement, their art work remaining independent of its political agenda.

The exhibitions point to another problem. For a number of reasons, from the ideological to the economic, these artists, for the most part, work outside the mainstream of Argentinean art. For many, this was a rare opportunity to exhibit. The art work itself showed the strains of its economic and social marginalization. The lack of sophistication, scale and originality were not so much the lack of talent but of time, money and resources. It reflects the fact that artists who are not internationally marketable have little economic support and time to develop their work. The reality of Argentinean economic life means that those artists from working- and even middle-class backgrounds have few opportunities. It also means that artists who might articulate a more nationally- or community-based vision have little room to develop.

There is an underlying context to any discussion of labour and community in Argentina and of art in relation to them. Peronism is one of the most difficult facets of Argentine life to understand. It has provided the political links and social solidarity between the artists and unions not only in the exhibitions but throughout the festival. While it is wrapped in myth and folklore, Peronism has a living and real presence. But it is a complicated one. Of all the electoral parties running in Argentina today, only one does not claim a Peronist heritage. The current Menem government is centre Peronist. All the trade unions are Peronist of one persuasion or another. The simplest explanation for this would suggest that Peronism represents both nationalism and the aspirations of workers and the poor. Perón had established national industries and attempted to make Argentina relatively self-sufficient. He brought in mandatory union membership and dues (that still exist today, although they are threatened) that allowed the union movement to become a major player on the Argentinean political scene. It also allowed an extensive union infra-



structure to be built that included cultural, health and education centres. He also developed parallel neighbourhood structures across Argentina. Eva Perón, claimed by many to be the spirit behind the man, established orphanages and programs for the poor.

Perón hoped to create a self-reliant corporate-state in alliance with labour and other social groups. While in North America part of the post-World War II compromise between labour and capital was the establishment of the welfare state, Perón made a deal with the unions where they took on part of this role. Following this move the unions became one of the mechanisms of social welfare. While avoiding the problems of state structures he also solidified an "independent" base of support. Unions and community organizations formed the base of political struggle as well as of social and cultural development.

Peronism was and still is a cultural phenomenon in itself. It remains a solid part of Argentinean popular culture, particularly Evita. But a state-driven national culture didn't seem to be on Perón's agenda. In fact, he was most often at odds with the intellectuals. Instead he concentrated on education, advocating a strong anti-imperialist position, especially against the United States. He encouraged forms of popular culture but these were developed through unions and community organizations. While Perón didn't say much about a national culture as such, his position provides an interesting political and social proposition, if not a theory, of a national culture. The model of empowering the social movements and thus allowing them to develop their own cultural initiatives may not have been a self-conscious program but it allowed a level of cultural autonomy that survived the vagaries of Argentinean political life.

There were two other exhibitions associated with the *Festival* that are worth noting. The first took place in San José Obrero. In the 1940s Perón organized neighbourhood political organizations, called *Locale Peronistes*, and similar to the unions they also had recreational and cultural centres. These organizations did not survive the political backlash as well as the unions, but their legacy is still remembered.

Kioscos

San José Obrero is a suburb of Buenos Aires. As you drive out of Buenos Aires into the interior you pass through the diminishing layers of wealth until the roads turn to dust and you reach the places where there is little opportunity.

The "*Festival de Arte y Trabajo de San José Obrero*" had been organized by a professor from the University of Buenos

Aires who had helped set up the festival. As with many professionals in Argentina, he freelances as a consultant on social work to area hospitals and schools. Through a hospital in San José Obrero, he met a nurse who worked with a local youth gang, the *Kioscos*, named after corner convenience stands. The nurse had been working with the *Kioscos* for the past year and a half, demonstrating that health is directly related to community well being.

A large man, he was respected by the gang and the community. The link with trade unions recalled the Peronist legacy of *Locale Peronistes* and appealed to the community.

Fireworks announced the opening of the community exhibition. It was held in an abandoned roofless warehouse. The small gathering was served orange mix drinks.

Members of the gang displayed graffiti and tattoo drawings that were, for the most part, emblems of their identity. A couple of the drawings referred to drugs and their effect on the community. The drawings were raw rites of passage. In another corner of the warehouse, a group of women, who had been organized by a craft artist, were showing their *arpilleras*³ that depicted an optimistic view of community life. The sales of these works contributed to abating the reality of unemployment. A food cooperative and community health group also participated with displays of their activities.

While there would be similar activities in other neighbourhoods, there seemed to be little institutional support for such activities except in some of the schools. There would be few, if any, public resources for this type of work. What does exist, as in this case, is based on volunteerism.

Escombros and Alla Plastica

The second exhibition was, in fact, a large public performance in which several artists created works on various social and environmental themes. It was organized by *Grupo Escombros*, a group from La Plata. A second La Plata group, *Alla Plastica*, were also involved in the performance. The two groups represent a more North American model of a politically engaged art.

La Plata is an hour east of Buenos Aires. Although it is the provincial capital there is no space between it and Buenos Aires, just a series of endless industrial suburbs along the river. The city is low key with little of the grandeur of Buenos Aires.



Part of an exhibition organized by the neighbourhood gang *Kioscos* in San José Obrero.

It is famous for its zoo. And it was to the zoo that I headed to meet with members of *Alla Plastica*, an environmental artists group. One of their three members had been hired to discuss environmental issues with school children who visit the zoo. It is part of their artistic mandate as well as a job. We meet in a small green and white hut, once a gardening shed, that houses their office and artwork. Outside stood one of the

minimalist looking sculptures the City helped to fund. They encase spent mercury-laden batteries in solid fiberglass rectangles at locations around the city. The plastic rectangles have brass plates explaining the contents. The children who visited the zoo would often bring in their ghetto-blasted batteries to help with the project. *Alla Plastica* were the only artists that I came across who received some form of government funding, such as it was. They also received funding from the

private Antorcha Foundation. Their relation to the community is a professional rather than a political or cultural one. It is more public art than community art.⁴

Later in the day two artists turned up who are members of *Grupo Escombros*, an artists' collective that, for the past eight years, has staged various performance interventions in the area. After a couple of beers, they took me to see one of their early projects. On a wall against the sidewalk on a main street is a mural titled *Theory of Art*. Four male figures are depicted banging their heads against the wall with actual cracks appearing at the appropriate places. It was painted in 1988 and has survived well. It maintains, apparently, a certain popularity in the city.

The public performance event, titled "*Todos o Ninguno*" (All or No One), was held in an abandoned lime kiln. The group's contribution was a clean up of the site, the facilitation of various performances and art works by invited artists and any others who came along. They also presented a manifesto, "The Aesthetics of Solidarity," and documented the day's activities. The residents of the area kept a respectful distance. While the event was only peripherally connected to the festival, it characterized a tendency that other festival events organized through the University reflected: the public artist as cultural missionary. Full of sympathy for the "culturally deprived," they promoted a participatory public spectacle that had no roots in the community. Even though the artists in the union exhibitions worked on their own, their relation to the community was one of respect. While full of good-sounding intentions, a



La Murga, a fiesta by a popular arts group held at the Building Maintenance Workers Cultural Centre (SUTERH) in Buenos Aires.

patronizing attitude informed the public performance event. This form of "participatory" public art is often confused with a more socially committed community art. The good intentions of public art can very quickly become a neo-liberal appropriation of more politically defined community cultures.

The other side of the neo-liberal agenda is to privatize what is public. So, while appropriating community cultures in the name of a de-politicized public art,⁵ you privatize the public institutions of culture to historically legitimate official culture. It's not outright privatization. That might be too costly for the private sector. Instead, you promote partnerships where the state runs the buildings and have corporations sponsor exhibitions and events. This way, the private sector gets the cake without having to buy the plate.

Chandon

Somewhat by accident, I attended the opening of "20•70•90" at the *Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes*, the national gallery of Argentina. It was a survey of recent work by mid-career Argentinean artists. As you walked in, a properly attired waiter was holding aloft an open bottle of *Chandon* sparkling white wine with a tray of glasses (real glass) ready to pour you a drink. Meanwhile, fifty other waiters were running around topping up the two hundred or so guests' barely empty glasses. *Chandon*, you soon learned, since their name appeared on everything from the exhibition title to the catalogue, was the corporate sponsor of the exhibition. The gallery has an annual exhibition budget of \$5,000 from

government sources. And this is the national gallery of Argentina! Corporate sponsors pay virtually the full cost for all the exhibitions.

The director greeted the most influential financial contributors at the door, skillfully leveraging the museum's future. The exhibition, surveying the top mid-career Argentine artists, took few risks. The work was large museum-scale painting and installations. It had the right New York credentials with a hint of local colour and ironic wit here or there, just the opposite of the artists included in the "Arte y Trabajo" exhibitions. Clearly, a privileged economy was operating here. But there was another difference. While the "Chandon" exhibit appeared more accomplished, it was much less engaging. It lacked spirit and commitment to anything other than its own success. Like international airports and hotels, the artworks were efficient, clever and sometimes well-designed, but they're the same the world round.

The Director, Jorge Glusberg, a large, shrewd fellow is the patriarch of contemporary Argentinean art. He was the founder, energy and benefactor behind the *Centro de Arte y Comunicación* (CAYC), an experimental arts centre in Buenos Aires. He organized exhibitions of Argentinean art in the U.S. and Europe, brought in top international artists, has written criticism, published catalogues, organized symposiums—essentially a one-person contemporary art scene with the money to finance it. Glusberg is also the owner of Modolor, one of the largest lighting firms in Argentina. CAYC was founded in the 1960s and still operates today. It has had, needless to say, a tremendous impact on contemporary

art in Argentina. It flourished through several governments including the period of the military dictatorship.

White Columns

I had the opportunity to visit CAYC soon after the opening at the *Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes*. The gallery was very stylish. It could easily have been in Paris or Berlin. The lighting courtesy of Modolor Inc., no doubt. The place was packed. In attendance was a good cross-section of the younger generation of internationally focused Buenos Aires artists. A group from among these artists had paid for the director of White Columns Gallery in New York to fly to Buenos Aires to give a lecture on how to succeed in New York as an artist. A not-inexpensive lecture in a not-so-wealthy country.

Some of the artists, who had gathered at a restaurant for a beer after the presentation, complained that the director hadn't really told them anything new. He had just shown slides of past exhibitions at White Columns. At that point one of the artists present remarked, "that's what succeeds in New York."

Most of these artists had, in fact, either just returned or were about to leave for the city of artistic promise. Apparently, Argentinean art has its own niche within the New York scene. But that's true of many cultures in the postmodern marketplace. It was hard to judge the degree to which the younger artists might be shifting away from European influences but clearly the economic ties to the U.S. are intensifying. As I was leaving a number of the artists gave me a small colour catalogue of their work. I collected six.

Galleria Borges

Thanks to the boys at the World Bank and the IMF, the government of Argentina is privatizing everything that moves. While there has been little public funding of the arts—what there is, mainly supports the physical infrastructure. There is now new energy on the part of private wealth to show its cultural benevolence. The *Galleria Pacifica* is a huge renovated downtown mall, Buenos Aires' Eaton Centre but more upscale. The money behind it is George Sarkis, the international mall financier. The top two floors, however, transform into the *Galleria Borges*, a private art museum. While many of the municipal contemporary art galleries

are, literally, falling apart or having to hang Japanese-sponsored exhibitions to cover the cost of light bulbs, the *Galleria Borges* spares no expense. If you visit, they have the most lavish washrooms in Buenos Aires. Unfortunately, they also had one of the better exhibitions of twentieth-century Argentinean art. But money talks. The exhibition was organized and exhibited by The Museum of Modern Art Oxford (England) with the help of the West Merchant Bank. The money behind the gallery comes from the elite of Argentinean and international corporations. It's the West Edmonton Mall for the rich. After shopping you can hang out at a gallery.

The exhibition covered Argentinean art from the 1920s to the 1990s. Generally speaking the work had more of a political thrust than similar work in Canada, particularly after the Second World War. As in most of Latin America, the work maintained European, particularly French, connections rather than American. However, twenty years of various military dictatorships had a chilling affect on the development of art in Argentina as well as most of Latin

America. As was intended, there was a break in the traditions of a socially engaged and critical art. A vocabulary of resistance has to be rebuilt in a new context, having been replaced, for the most part, by the cynical market hype of internationalism. This helps explain both the problems with the work displayed at the "Arte y



Encuentro de Arte y Trabajo, a group exhibition held at the CGT union hall.

Trabajo" exhibitions and the emptiness of the work displayed at such places as CAYC and the *Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes*.

Going to Market

As someone visiting from Canada, the most noticeable aspect of Argentine art is its dependency on the private market. There has been little direct public support for the arts in Argentina except for the physical maintenance of a few museums, galleries, theatre and concert centres. The kind of state funding that exists in Canada and elsewhere is virtually non-existent in Latin America, as are U.S.-type foundations. Given the relative poverty of Argentina, most artists can't supplement their incomes from teaching or arts-related work. To secure even a decent living often means

holding down two or several part-time jobs. There are no artists' cooperatives or alternative galleries. Private collectors and large corporations are the major sources of support. The market is it.

Some writers have suggested that Argentina, in the late 1940s, was economically positioned similar to Canada. It seems that it was also culturally positioned in a similar fashion. In fact, Argentina might have been a bit ahead. The course of events since, of course, have been very different. The social and cultural aspirations of Argentina were subdued through violence while Canada was pressured to politely give many of them away. Not surprisingly, however, there are now growing similarities once again between the two countries as globalization turns all difference into a shopping mall of corporate identity. Both countries are seeing the erosion of their local cultures and the institutions associated with them.

Public Funding

While public funding can be seen, in part, as a step toward democratizing culture, this democratization has been balanced against specific notions of quality and excellence. The postwar "historic compromise" in countries like Canada around issues of a national culture took the form of public funding based on the principals and values of the market. Grants to individual artists are seen as support until they can secure a place in the private market. Artists-run centres are similarly seen as stepping stones into the market. The whole public arts funding system is often described as R&D for the private sector. In reality, it is not a truly public or democratic system as such, but, as in other sectors, a public subsidization of private interests.

There are, however, democratic elements within the system. The notions of arm's length and peer assessment are part of the historic compromise, even though arm's length is a loaded principal—it works both to protect and limit the system.⁶ There are also unintentional slippages and pressures. These include questions of representation and identity, community practice and accountability. Public funding has allowed a sector of artists to develop work and practices outside the market and to begin to articulate alternative concepts of cultural production and cultural democracy.



A mural in the CGT union hall painted in the 1940s.

These are the artists, of course, who will be most affected by the current cutbacks to public arts funding in Canada.

There seem to be two problems raised by the current cutbacks to public funding. One has to do with the vulnerability to right-wing populist attack. The arts, when it gets down to the crunch, don't have a lot of social allies. Arts agencies have relied on the liberal authors of the historic compromise to protect them against the right. Now that the liberals

have dropped the idea of social responsibility, the agencies are left stranded. The general public has little understanding of what they do. And the art they most often see doesn't impress them. Those that support public funding often have little political clout and those who have clout and support the arts often don't support public funding. As a result there is relatively little public outcry when the cuts come.

The second problem is that in defending such institutions from cutbacks, it forces you to defend a system that needs rethinking. Part of the success of the right is that they are able to use valid criticisms to carry out invalid solutions. Part of the problem of the left is that you end up defending invalid institutions for valid reasons. There are some serious problems with the current models of public arts funding.

What alternatives are there and what does this have to do with Argentina? While Argentina shows what we could end up with, it also suggests an alternative model. Although the concept of devolution of government funding is not unique to Argentina, it is one of the few places⁷ where I saw some evidence of its effect, however rudimentary. Devolution is a system in which public funds are given directly to non-governmental organizations to use as they see fit within a broad mandate. Devolution can be brought about in different ways. In Argentina the unions are able to finance programs because laws give them the financial means to do so (membership and dues are mandatory under law). The cultural infrastructure of the trade unions in Argentina is impressive, particularly given its political history. Other forms of devolution involve the redistribution of money through government. For example, instead of a government cultural agency (including those at arm's length) deciding which arts projects should receive funding, the money would go directly to specific communities, including the arts community, who would then decide on how to distribute it on a democratic basis.

While not denying the difficulties of establishing what

communities would be recognized etc., devolved funding would seem to fit many agendas. It would allow certain levels of self-determination within given communities—a central political value to all cultures. It would allow greater democracy and would broaden the base of both access to and support for culture. It could also tie into community economic development, broadening the potential economics of cultural production and increase its potential to challenge the monopoly of mass media. If nothing else, such an argument could shift the political debate which would argue for a more democratic, devolved funding system and if enough noise is made, the right might save the system we have for fear of something more radical taking hold. At the same time, a new model is put forward on the agenda. My experience of Argentina was both a warning and a confirmation. Alternative practices do survive even in the most extreme situations. Wealth cannot privatize the spirit. And we can learn from how cultures have survived to save the ones we are in danger of losing.

Aftershock

It's a few months later. The former mayor of Toronto hosts a reception to announce the new Artists and Communities program only to have it later described in the *Globe and Mail* as a populist gesture, after forty years of elitism, marking the anniversary of the Canada Council. It is a pilot community arts initiative in partnership with various provincial and municipal arts councils and the Laidlaw Foundation. That's Laidlaw as in trucking and waste management but a different branch of the family, I'm told. Equally disturbing was the fact that few of those in attendance seemed to see any problem with the inclusion of the Laidlaw Foundation in the program. I was repeatedly told about how progressive the Foundation is and the positive things it has done. Public accountability however was not talked about. If Laidlaw decides to pull out at some point, what recourse is there? Whichever way you look at it, the end result is private control of public money. However it only took a couple of weeks after the mayor's announcement of the new arts funding initiative for the then Minister of Culture in Ontario to state that public funding of the arts is not in the public interest.

On another note, I realized, in seeing the exhibition at the *Galleria Borges* in Buenos Aires and the accompanying catalogue, that I haven't seen a similar historic survey of Canadian art.⁸ As I viewed the exhibition I became aware of how little we know or respect our own Canadian cultural histories. This lack of historical understanding, of course, eases the transition to a U.S.-inspired business model of cultural production and the values associated with it. The Argentinean exhibition had been produced by a British institution and bank. Such an exhibition of Canadian art might also point to a similar process of depoliticalization and require the benevolence of an international corporation seeking local legitimacy.

My Argentine friend suggested that Latin America is the testing ground for U.S. government and corporate policy. Argentina has undergone massive privatization with the state stripped of its social responsibilities. It has created a business culture dependent on the benevolence of corporate taste. In this scenario the arts become the upper edge of consumer desire in a world measured by competitive efficiency. Another scenario might suggest the arts returning to community roots that are socially as well as geographically defined. The trick will be to give these communities and the culture they produce political and economic definitions as well.

Acknowledgment

The article was researched and written with the assistance of the Ontario Arts Council.

Karl Beveridge is a photographer/artist who works in Toronto. A former editor of FUSE Magazine, he has written various articles on labour and community art.

Notes

1. The festival included a great number of events in other disciplines. I have concentrated on visual art as it is what I know best. Events included theatre, music, dance, panels presentations as well as the visual art exhibitions.
2. In Argentina, the CP had been marginalized by Peronism and played a minor role in the union movement and national politics. Today, as elsewhere, it exists in name only.
3. *Arpilleras* are small fabric wall hangings that originated in Chile during the Pinochet regime depicting scenes of daily life often containing political references.
4. There is often confusion between what constitutes public and community art. Generally speaking, public art refers to art that is made for public spaces. While public artists sometimes consult the general public they are seldom accountable to a community other than their government or corporate sponsors. Community artists, on the other hand, collaborate with a community and encourage various levels of participation in the production of their work.
5. It is interesting that in post-Thatcher England, public art is the big thing being financed through lottery funds. Public art projects are sprouting up all over the country and is the only public funding now available for many community artists.
6. The few "survey" exhibitions in Canada have been based on a particular theme or topic. There has been no attempt to create a historic argument about Canadian art or to place it within a larger social political context that might account, I should add, for its various communities and differences.
7. The megacity fightback in Toronto is an example where none of the non-profit (arm's length) arts organizations felt they could take a political position.
8. Sweden has one of the few systems of devolved cultural funding that I am aware of. It is primarily aimed at three social sectors (unions, churches and temperance societies) but also includes institutional arts funding (theatres, symphony orchestras, film production, etc.).

"CECI N'EST PAS UNE ARCHIVE"

Browser

ARTROPOLIS '97

CURATED BY ANDREW RENTON AND KITTY SCOTT

ROUNDHOUSE COMMUNITY CENTRE, VANCOUVER, OCTOBER 25–NOVEMBER 23, 1997

REVIEW BY CATERINA PIZANIAS

*"Browser" has emerged from the important local, yet short, history of large, seemingly inclusive exhibitions and smaller, selected exhibitions. It is an attempt to provide a structure which is able to be as inclusive and representative as is possible. Every artist in British Columbia has been welcome to participate.*¹

"Browser" is the fourth reincarnation of a series of exhibitions which took place previously in 1988, 1990 and 1993 and it has its beginnings in the "October Show" (1983), an exhibit mounted in anger against the exclusivity of the Vancouver Art Gallery's inaugural exhibit in its current home on Robson entitled "Vancouver: Art and Artists 1931–83." The "October Show" has attained mythical status and is seen by many as the defining moment of Vancouver's artistic "counterculture," so much so that it is frequently referred to as the city's own *Salon des Refusés*.² When the time came for the latest go-round of the "Artropolis"³ exhibit, the "Artropolis" Board—from day one, this rebellion has been managed by a board of five—decided that "Artropolis" had become an institution in its own right and in recognition/celebration of same, it was decided that professional curators were needed to usher in "the dawning of a whole new day."⁴ Enter Andrew Renton and Kitty Scott.

In 1996, the requisite call for submissions went out and a rather impressive number of artists responded, approximately 600

in all. "But it wasn't a show, so we took a different approach. And we asked the artists to re-submit," said Kitty Scott.⁵ The new approach asked the artists to resubmit with one limitation—their submissions could take any shape or form, but must fit within a standard Hollinger filing box. This way, the curators thought they could still continue the tradition of inclusivity but also gain in manageability. About half of the original artists resubmitted, the other half decided to ridicule the "boxing of art" or malign the curators' importation of "high concept art."⁶ The artists brought their submissions, they were catalogued and put into the Hollinger boxes—some with finished miniature works, others with proposals for future large-scale work; some had CD-ROMs or videos and yet others had personal artifacts and memorabilia that the artists thought of as defining their work or themselves.

All submissions that could be fitted in the boxes were accepted, and the artists were then interviewed by staff in order to record and determine cross-references so as to make a structure on which as wide as possible "browsing" could take place. The ensuing database was organized alphabetically, cross-referenced and transferred onto CD-ROM.⁷

Browser takes an unusual form for a contemporary art exhibition: it is an exhibition constructed as an archive or an archive constructed as an exhibition. This hybrid resource can be explored, analyzed and reconfigured by its audience.... In this way every

artist, whether established or less well known, has equivalent representation within the project.⁸

A visitor to "Browser," upon payment of the entrance fee, was given a pamphlet describing the show and was asked to check coats and oversized bags. First, one saw a series of tables, some occupied, others not; behind these tables was a series of desks and computer terminals, and further back the metal frame filing shelves neatly lined with the Hollinger archival boxes. Almost immediately, a volunteer arrived to explain the nitty-gritty of the exhibit. First, one had to fill out a form with information such as name and address, a piece of ID to be held until all borrowed material was returned—these were security precautions to preserve the boxes and their contents. Once the visitors had submitted "their credentials," they were given a stack of request forms for their eventual choices.⁹

With pamphlet and request forms in hand, I sat in front of a computer terminal. "[Browser]" concerns a history of sitting and thinking. The walking that accompanies most exhibitions will not be entirely ruled out.¹⁰ After "browsing" for a while, I had made three request "piles"—by concept, gender and ethnicity. I began going up to the circulation desk, giving them one request form at a time. Each time, a person took my form, went to the files, retrieved the box, opened it in front of me, and carefully showed and accounted for its contents, and then ever so carefully gave the box to me. Equally carefully, I brought the box to my table and exam-



Installation view of "Browser," 1997.

ined its contents at my leisure. Although many of the contents did not live up to my expectations, I really liked the closeness of the inspection, the tactility of the whole experience. Rather quickly, I was caught up in the theatricality of it all. I sat at my table watching others going through the same ritual—gloved hands and solemn exchanges—when it hit me: How clever Renton and Scott had been, simultaneously making use of and subverting the discursive underbelly of the museum culture! Their "hybrid resource," when performed, became a morality play on the unexamined life/history of an artistic counterculture. Think about it: "Browser, Artropolis '97" accepted all submissions, thus breaking down the dichotomy of "emerging" vs. "established" artists; they stood on its head the museum's status as an "educator of the people" by treating the people as formal equals—both the producers and consumers of their own artistic knowledge; and by coyly describ-

ing their project as an archive and exhibition, they provided their—(historically minded) audience with an opportunity to experience our (the West's) continued fascination with artifact and data collection/categorization/storage/retrieval.

One would assume that Vancouver's countercultural berets would have been tipped in appreciation toward Andrew Renton and Kitty Scott for their political acumen and sense of humour. But even a cursory look at the anonymous comments in the guest book—the most personal and venomous—as well as the eponymous ones in the local press, reveals a community circling the wagons to protect itself, its "truth" and "authenticity" from an alien curatorial invasion. Renton and Scott are accused of:

- (a) "hijacking" the show—even though they were chosen by Artropolis' Board;
- (b) of practicing "high concept art" as

opposed, I suppose to the "low concept art" of the previous curatorial committees; (c) of being "non-democratic"—even though "Browser" is the only "Artropolis" that accepted all submissions; (d) of being "destroyers" of the City's long countercultural heritage—even though all previous Artropolises included artists/curators exhibiting and working simultaneously at the VAG and commercial venues;¹¹ and (e) of ignoring the "public at large"—even though "Browser" gave the public the right to choose what it looked at and how/when.¹²

It is beyond the scope of this review to fully examine why "Browser" has been so negatively received,¹³ but I am willing to wager that "Browser" touched a collective truth-nerve in Vancouver's alternative culture: despite loud cries for democracy



Installation view of "Browser," 1997.

and sustained revolution, this culture was never counter, barely parallel (Vancouver is not unique in this regard). It has been one and the same as the much-maligned establishment, sharing personnel, audience, state and commercial patronage alike. To nostalgically yearn for the good old times is to have never understood the historical frame of the art world or outgrown its romantically imbued notions of avant-garde/rebellions/reforms. In closing, I would like—along with Tony Bennett—to remind us what Michel Foucault said about those calling for prison reform: the reformers always called “for reform to allow [the prison] to live up to its rehabilitation rhetoric. Yet, however ineffective such reforms prove, the viability of the prison is rarely put into question.”¹⁴ “Browser,” successfully and in good humour, put the countercultural viability of “Artropolis” into question. Now that the dust has settled down, one can only hope that its detractors will give it another “browse.”

The “Browser” web site can be found at: <http://www.axionet.com/artropolis>.

Caterina Pizani is an itinerant academic and writer who believes that the most relevant art for

our times—and the one she has been trying to document—is the art that best reveals the restrictive subtexts of modernity.

Notes

1. *Browser*, *Artropolis 97*, exhibit pamphlet.
2. See *Vancouver Anthology: The Institutional Politics of Art*, edited by Stan Douglas (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1991), especially the Introduction and the essays by Keith Wallace and William Wood.
3. Neologisms are coined on the spur of the moment, and Artropolis as a “take” on metropolis (metro+polis) has been stuck with an unnecessary and tongue-twisting “r” (Art+polis=Artropolis).
4. Judith Mastai, a Board member, quoted in *The Vancouver Sun* in “Scene and Heard” by Kerry Gold, 22 November 1996, D1.
5. Kitty Scott, quoted in “Hand of the Curator” by Michael Turner, *Vancouver Magazine*, November 1967, p. 34.
6. For a taste of local reactions to “Browser” see: Robin Laurence “The World in a Box, or Simply Boxed In? *Artropolis '97's* archival approach will alienate some viewers while inspiring others” *The Georgia Straight*, 30 October – 6 November 1997, p. 57; Michael Scott, “Artropolis boxes contain anything and everything,” *The Vancouver Sun*, 25 October 1997, D1 and D2; Tim Carlson, “Little Boxes Create Big Backlash: Browser has many of the city’s rebel artists

longing for a more traditional Artropolis,” *The Georgia Straight*, 10–17 July 1997, p. 51.

7. *Browser Text Version* is an interesting source that includes the curators’ e-mail and other exchanges in the months preceding the exhibition.

8. “Browser” pamphlet, *op. cit.*

9. Tony Bennett, “The Exhibitionary Complex,” in *The Birth of the Museum: history, theory, politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 59-88.

10. “Browser” pamphlet, *op. cit.*

11. For a sampling of how things happened in previous Artropolises see: Olaf, “The Promise of Artropolis,” *The Georgia Straight*, 2–9 October 1987, p. 27; “Peter Wilson, Art vs. ART: ‘Ins’ and ‘Outs’ battle in an exhibition beset by arts politics at its most basic,” *Saturday Review*, 6 October 1990, D1 and D8; Paula Gustafson, “Artropolis Tackles the Big Issues: Giant exhibition promises controversial and provocative artworks,” *The Georgia Straight*, 15–22 October, 1993, p. 33.

12. A vignette on how art displayed in Stanley Park during *Artropolis 93* was received/judged by the “general” public will point to the unresolved relationship between art as “learned” discipline and everyday life. “A stroller on the Stanley Park seawall has become worried. The older man stops. He points to a hazard to boaters—a piece of sculpture, *Mary’s Violet Eyes* by Deborah Koenker comprising (in part) of tires that hang over the edge of the seawall near Second Beach. What if, asks the concerned citizen, some weekend sailor mistakes the word-emblazoned tires as a place to land at high tide? And what if he ends up hitting the rocks? Isn’t that a problem? Well, isn’t it? Rich Gibson, the curator of the Stanley Park section of *Artropolis 93: Public Art on Public Issues* remains calm, smiles, and explains that he has had approval from every conceivable level of bureaucracy for the placement of the art works along the seawall.” As reported by Peter Wilson, *Vancouver Sun*, 23 October 1993, B9.

13. I am presently working on an ethnography of Artropolis “by proxy”—i.e. examining the public dialogue on its history as preserved in the local press, institutional newsletters, catalogues and similar sources.

14. Michel Foucault, quoted by Tony Bennett in *The Birth of the Museum, op.cit.*, p. 90.

BIG-BOX KNOCKOUT

Community vs. Consumerism

VIDEO SHORTS CURATED BY MIKE CONNELLY AND MARIANNE GIBSON

PRESENTED BY ED VIDEO

GUELPH, MAY 25–JUNE 23, 1997

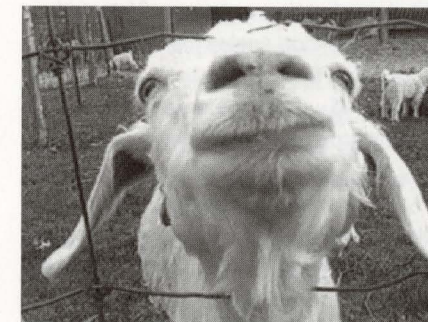
REVIEW BY SHERRI TELENKO

A friend once told me he believed Guelph, Ontario, was good for only two things: growing wheat and the witness relocation program. Well, he can add a third: fighting the big box. If you spent any time in Guelph over the past year, you may have caught wind of the loud debate over the value of building big box stores, such as Wal-Mart, on the outskirts of this small city. A residents’ organization called the Big-Box Action Group led by Thomas Entertainment owner, Ian Findlay, believes that big box development will lure shopping dollars out of the downtown core, and threaten the essence of the community of Guelph.

Others, like Hammerson Development Corporation president Bruce Heyland, argue that downtown retailers attract a completely different market than the one targeted by Wal-Mart. He believes that Power Stations, which are defined as a big box store clustered with other stores, will reduce the flow of shopping dollars seeping out of Guelph and into surrounding areas.

Eight video artists joined this heated debate with the screening of “Big-Box Knockout: Community vs. Consumerism”—a series of video shorts sponsored by Ed Video, an established downtown artist-run centre. The video artists were each given \$100 worth of production time, \$50 in tape and five weeks to produce a video to be screened on May 25, one day before the city council’s debate.

According to Mike Connelly, the artistic director of Ed Video and one of the pro-



Above: *Swept Away*, Kathleen Doerner Miller.
Below: still from *Peter*, Bonnie Bettridge.



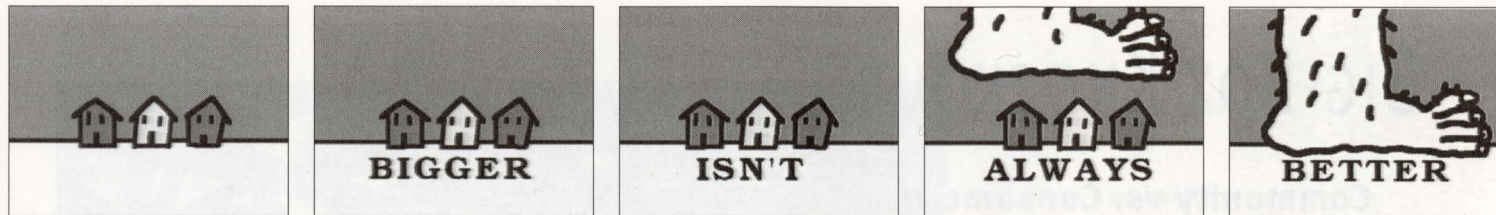
ject’s co-organizers, the purpose of the video series was “to involve local artists in the big box debate and get the arts centre more involved with the community.” This kind of involvement in “community issues” is a survival tactic that artists and art centres are adopting to become more visible, and to generate support at a time of depleting public funding resources. But “Big-Box Knockout” was curious in its shift away from “education” toward a kind of “reaction.” In conversation, Connelly warned that the project is not “an organizing tool. People should not expect to come away educated.” What appears to be more important to him is what the big box issue means to artists.

He states, “some [artists] react with gut feelings or impressions that may not be entirely clear about what they are saying.” His emphasis is on producing art, not community-building.

The subtitle of the project is “Community versus Consumerism,” which sets up a conflict between two politically loaded words. We should expect some amount of education, some level of consciousness-raising. If not, what saves the project from becoming “gut-reaction art” rather than politically motivated art, consequently reducing the project to the simple idea that consumerism is bad?

The videos in this series prove to recognize more complex relationships. *Cultural Overload*, a video by Mike Leznoff, Reginald Stacey and Colin Dewar, won the people’s choice award at the end of the first public screening, perhaps because of its focus on the detrimental effects of escalated consumerism, and not simply the evils of consumerism itself. After all, watching these videos is a form of consumption and the artists and co-ordinators should get appropriate fees for subsequent public screenings. *Cultural Overload* opens with a soothing, documentary style that lulls the audience, and then becomes a metaphoric roller coaster ride of sped-up images accompanied by a voice-over frantically describing the adverse psychological effects of increased consumption.

Humour makes a bitter pill sweeter to swallow and two of the eight video artists



Bigger Isn't Always Better, Mike Constable.

took this to heart: Mike Constable contributes two brief, animated shorts designed to be downloaded from the Internet. In the first, a giant, hairy foot stomps out a square box proclaiming, "Bigger Isn't Always Better." Constable's second animation is also quick to make its point. In *Big Box Stores Mean Cheap Housing*, cars with discounted T.V. boxes zoom past little guy Joe's T.V. store until finally Joe himself is forced to close shop and live in a cardboard T.V. box. Constable's work is oddly foreboding yet, at the same time, somehow endearing.

Similarly, Kathleen Doerner Miller's *Swept Away* opens with cheerful, individual shots of playful, grazing farm animals. As the sound track grows increasingly frenetic, the barnyard "patrons" are herded like cattle into the isles of a generic Wal-Mart store. The customers are lured by sale prices and cheesy muzak. More amusing than chilling, *Swept Away* simply encapsulates the idea of consumerism as false belief.

The most successful videos in this series are those that counteract static facts, figures and statistics with an emotional probe into the effects that the issues have on the individual, and essentially, they speak to the role that art can play in political debate. The one contribution in the series that embraces the educational potential of video is Gregory Klages' *Always Fresh*. Shot with a documentary research style, *Always Fresh* alternates between a flawlessly edited voice-only soundtrack of an unscripted former Tim Horton's employee, and familiar unstaged shots of the inside of an average Tim Horton's franchise. The woman's story begins on a relatively cheerful note as she admits she initially approached her job as "easy money for easy work." But gradually the anger in her voice is unveiled as she

recounts her slow disillusionment with the repetitive, mindless work and lack of creative thinking the corporation encouraged.

If *Always Fresh* is the voice of reason within this series, *Peter* by Bonnie Bettridge is the soul. *Peter* is deceptively simple and at times obscure. Distorted scenes from odd angles inside a grocery store, often through the bars of a cart, are juxtaposed with documentation of Peter reading store flyers and making a shopping list. By the end of the video, we are privy to a glimpse of the personal stockpile of cans and goods that Peter carefully dates and shelves, symbolically creating his own Wal-Mart world. At this point, we interpret Peter as a person obsessed with hoarding products, until we learn from the programme notes that Peter is from a large, rural Ukrainian immigrant family. Lack of food was, at one time, a reality for him. In this light, it is not Peter's obses-



Above: still from *I Once Was Alive*, Mary Cross.
Below: *Cultural Overload*, Mike Leznoff.



sion that is disturbing, but our own assumptions and dependencies that consumerism breeds in our culture.

Peter highlights the fear shared by all eight video artists in the "Big-Box Knockout" project and the Big-Box Action Group, which is not simply that big box stores will become competition to smaller independently owned shops, but that gradually they may become the only option, and consequently, a necessity. This fear may continue to be a reality, but on June 9 the anti-big box supporters triumphed as city council voted eight to four to reject big box-style retail development in Guelph. This municipal victory indicates that the screening may have had some effect on public awareness about the effects of big box development, a victory that also highlights the potential that art can have in contributing to social change.

"Big-Box Knockout" complete video list:

- If You Ask Us* by Don Alexander (2:15)
- Peter* by Bonnie Bettridge (4:15)
- Bigger Isn't Always Better and Cheap Housing*, by Mike Constable, (0:20) and (0:40)
- I Once Was Alive* by Mary Cross (2:10)
- Swept Away* by Kathleen Doerner Miller (2:40)
- Always Fresh* by Gregory Klages (3:09)
- Cultural Overload* by Mike Leznoff, with Reginald Stacey and Colin Dewar (5:00)
- In Response To* by Christof Migone (2:14)

"The Big-Box Knockout" was screened at Thomas Entertainment, May 26 to June 23 in downtown Guelph. The opening screening was held at The Bookshelf Cinema in Guelph, May 25, 1997. Further public screenings can be arranged through V Tape in Toronto or Ed Video, 16A Wyndham St., P.O. Box 1629, Guelph, N1H 6R7 (519) 836-9811.

Sherri Telenko is the arts editor at *id Magazine*, a weekly publication distributed throughout southwestern Ontario.

MIASMA

Clear and Cold at the Higher Elevations

MYRA DAVIES AND GUDRUN GUT
PERFORMANCES AND CDS

REVIEW BY STEVE HEIMBECKER

The little girl disagreed:

"I don't think of my life as insect-like. I don't even think of your life as insect-like. I know you are a bug but I don't think of you that way.... I don't look at people as limbed worms, as wriggling tubes, with teeth at one end and an anus at the other. I won't look at it that way. I can't. It's too disturbing. If we look at life that way it has no meaning and life has got to have meaning."

"Meaning," said the bug, "is a strategy for hiding the instability of one's position."

"BUG" Trk 12, Myra Davies, Miasma 2: clear and cold at the higher elevations, audio CD, 1997

These lyrics are part of the new mixed media theatrical performances and publications of Banff writer and performance artist Myra Davies in collaboration with electronic / techno sound composer Gudrun Gut of Berlin, Germany, known together as MIASMA. Their new performance production is led by a Moabit Musik (Berlin) CD (Festival Distribution in Canada), *Miasma 2: clear and cold at the higher elevations*, which follows the 1993 CD publication *Miasma* and performance production *Stupid as a Rose*.

Davies and Gut met in Berlin in 1991. Their project MIASMA evolved through alternating sessions in Germany and Canada. In this past year they appeared

in several electronic music festivals in Germany and have also appeared at Angry Women Live Festivals in Vienna and Berlin. In Calgary in 1996, during Maenad Theatre's Fem Fest, they produced *Miasma—Stupid as a Rose*, the second in a trilogy of mixed media feminist theatricals. Their first theatrical was *Miasma—A Butoh Opera*, with Japanese Butoh artist Hiroko Tamano, presented at The Banff Centre in 1992.

MIASMA productions commonly start with Davies' text and then incorporate Gut's electronic music. From this base, image and object, through the use of film, video, installation, theatre, performance, and whatever else it may take, are brought to the light of the performance stage. The result is interdisciplinary artworks that are distinctive in content and syntax. The core of the work revolves around Davies' ability to write text of a fantastic and voyeuristic nature, providing multiple layers of meaning and imagery from an alluring, coolly spoken, feminist perspective. This voicing is amplified by Gut's electronic/techno sampled-sound compositions, which dynamically transmit mood, rhythm and technique. These two elements never seem to interfere or detract from one another as they do too often today, in the emotionless din of electronically laden interdisciplinary and multimedia artworks.

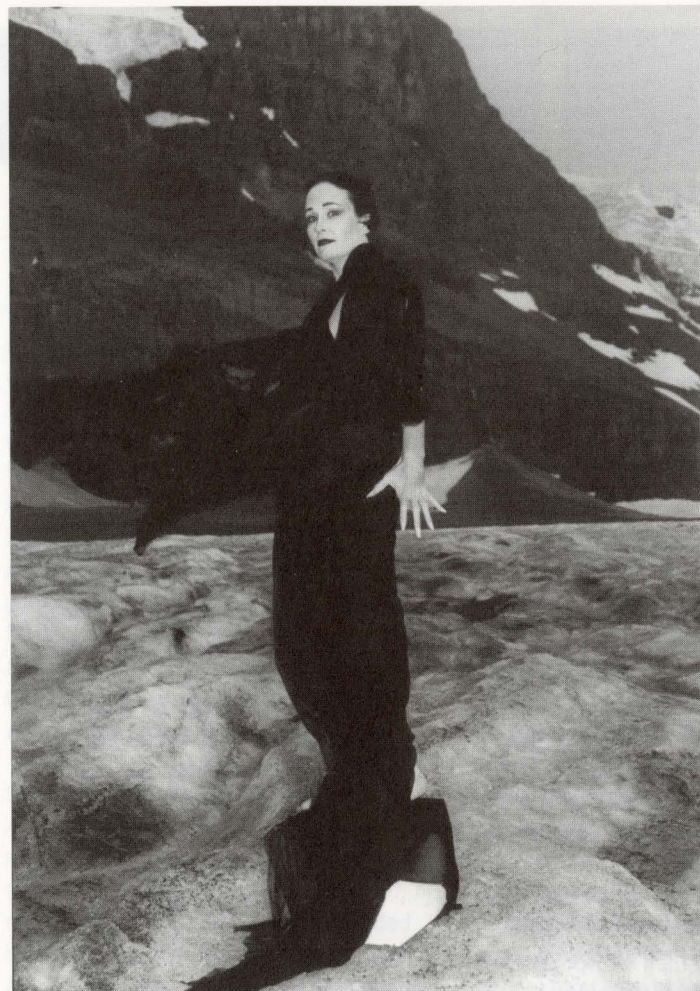
Four fingers lying on a white linen cloth. They looked out of place.... I had to dismiss the argument that the fingers belonged to somebody

else. But one thing kept nagging at me. If they're his then those fingers have been all over me and I don't even know them. That didn't feel right.... And I thought to myself, "My God, those are his fingers." And seeing them now as his, I found them touching, beautiful even. But it was a little late for that.

"FINGERS" Trk 5, Myra Davies, Miasma 2: clear and cold at the higher elevations, audio CD, 1997

From the Random House College Dictionary, the word miasma has as one of its definitions: "a dangerous, foreboding or deathlike influence or atmosphere." In today's terms this could relate to the choking stench of car exhaust. When placed within the context of MIASMA's thematic framework of deconstructing romanticism we might accept our lack of air because we are in love. We are in love with our cars, our stereos, our cell phones and beepers. We are like delusional lovers strangling each other at the height of orgasm, *la petite mort*, the little death—literally. It is a tangled web we weave when the objects of our desire are the sterile objects of our technologies. We believe we are romantic, that our relationships to these objects is natural, our love and desire are pure. Our frustration is lust, our confusion is trust.

Sexually promiscuous, hungry for emotion, ravenous for admiration, but contemptuous of those who provide it, he avoids involvement.



Production still from video shoot on the Columbia Icefields, *Miasma 2*, "Rite of Spring," Myra Davies, co, 1997.

Sadistic elements predominate in the superego of these patients and they complain of inner emptiness while entertaining fantasies of omnipotence and a strong belief in their right to exploit others.

"PRINCESS" Trk 6, Myra Davies, *Miasma 2*: clear and cold at the higher elevations, audio C.D., 1997

For a moment imagine, for example, the classic twentieth-century role models, the romantic Barbie and Ken and their swinging, plastic lifestyles. With this in mind, make an analogy with Bram Stoker's plump little nineteenth-century pincushions, Mina and Jonathan Harker, accompanied by the restless dead and blood hungry Count Dracula. Bring the centuries together, and have some fun. In MIASMA, the metaphoric reconstruction of the romantic model provides a framework to position the audience, to allow the audi-

ence a conceptual entry point into the critique of their own time and social values. Something familiar but not quite proper, titillating, ghostly, like a suppressed youthful dream, a fantasy, complete with love, life, struggle and death.

Using the contradictions Davies finds during the exploration of romanticism, MIASMA theatricals attempt to explore with the audience the confused iconography of status quo meaning and belief. This is active art. To reiterate Davies' words: "Meaning," said the bug, "is a strategy for hiding the instability of one's position." By suspending everyday meaning through irony and paradox, MIASMA stabilizes their creative position, substituting common beliefs with new critical representations through the syntax of MIASMA's own creative context. If the elements of romanticism can be likened to the multiple images and meanings found in a deck of Tarot cards, Davies and

Gut have designed their own set of cards complete with riveting visuals and symbols, shuffled the deck thoroughly, and through their performances, offer new readings to the audience in the form of interdisciplinary theatricals.

"I know that," said the little girl. "That is why I obsess on hair. What choice have I got? I hate the gym."

"Fetishes," said the bug, "have no effect on the universe."

"I'll show you effect," said the little girl. "I'm God!"

And she squashed him flat with her tissue.

"BUG" Trk 12, Myra Davies, Miasma 2: clear and cold at the higher elevations, audio CD, 1997.

When working, Davies and Gut offer a series of impressions: conceptual, visual and audible. These are presented together in a relatively open and constructive approach to collaborative art making. Their productions include the assistance of many local women (and men) from the art communities in which MIASMA productions are presented. Views of Western society are framed by a new romanticism built upon the conflictive and disparate dialectics of twentieth century culture and gender, making each of MIASMA's interdisciplinary performances perversely sexy and sardonically funny. Myra Davies and Gudrun Gut ambitiously present a distinct perspective of our social values, challenging conventional notions of theatre, performance, music and feminism.

MIASMA can be visited through their web site: <http://www.monkeyboy.com/miasma/main.html>.

Steve Heimbecker is an audio artist, installation artist and writer, living and working in Calgary.

7A*11D

Performance Art Festival

TORONTO, AUGUST 7-11, 1997

REVIEW BY PAUL COUILLARD

In the 1970s and early 1980s, performance art was a mainstay of artistic activity in Toronto. The most striking aspect of A Space's twenty-fifth anniversary celebrations in the fall of 1996, for example, was the enormous emphasis placed on time-based and particularly performance art activity in defining the history and timeline of A Space's cultural contribution. Yet from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, Toronto's performance art scene faded from view.¹

A flurry of performance art events beginning in the summer of 1996 marked an end to the decade-long "dry spell." Suddenly, performance art seemed to be everywhere, cropping up in independent, self-produced events, ambitious presentations by newly formed performance art organizations, and to a lesser extent within more established art institutions. Inspired by the volume, range and depth of work being produced, a number of artists met in early January of 1997 to bring some of these pockets of activity together.

Many of the artists at this initial meeting had never met, though they were aware of each other's work. The goal of the meeting was to break down some of the isolation, and perhaps figure out ways to work together to encourage the recent momentum. The idea of producing a festival cropped up very early in the discussions, and within a month, the group had transformed itself into the steering committee of the 7a*11d Performance Art Festival. As a longtime creator and producer of performance art, I was intimately involved in

this process, taking on roles as an organizer, curator and presenting artist in the ensuing festival. It is from that perspective that I offer these comments about the development of what promises to be an ongoing event.²

The steering committee was an unlikely alliance of artists with differing aesthetics and varied experience ranging from long-time veterans of the artist-run centre network to Ontario College of Art & Design (OCAD) students. Forming a working group required a commitment to the notion of grassroots community-building. Perhaps ironically, holding the group together also required a complicit vagueness of both roles and definitions. We avoided imposing a rigid structure on the group; there was no leader, no president, no executive. By the same token, we did not come up with even a working definition of performance art as a form. Although we discussed what kinds of things we wanted to do and see, exact parameters would have inevitably polarized the group and led to dissension and dogma. Working together was a learning process for all of us, and required that we keep our visions open and expansive to accommodate other, and sometimes contradictory viewpoints.

An unwillingness to impose rigid definitions did not require abandoning aesthetic or critical standards. We developed the idea of a series of autonomously curated events, each with their own focus but benefiting from the blanket umbrella of the festival. This allowed us to present a wide range of work in a variety of venues. The

organization of the festival took place in tandem with an informal mentoring process. Experienced organizers outlined the process and identified critical concerns while allowing younger members room to develop their own ideas and learn for themselves what was required. We found ways to turn what seemed like obstacles to our own advantage. The necessary and often burdensome process of fundraising became a first chance to produce as a team, a way to discover our individual strengths and organizing styles. Our lack of institutional support gave us freedom and

7a*11d Statistics

Dates: August 7-11, 1997
 Number of Venues: 6
 Number of Steering Committee members: 13
 Number of presented artists: 57
 (23 Toronto-based, 22 other Canadian, 12 foreign)
 Total cash budget: under \$25,000

Five Holes: Touched

Location: Symptom Hall, 160 Claremont St.
 Curator: Paul Couillard
 8 performances

Format: simultaneous performance installations dealing with the sense of touch

"Touch is arguably the most intimate and revealing of the senses, the one that, above all others, can move us to ecstasy or shatter us.... Human cultures are rife with taboos around the sense of touch—who, what how, when and where we can or can't touch—governing even the touches we give our own bodies."



from the corner of my eye, Koren Bellman. Photo: Cheryl Rondeau.

flexibility to develop our own parameters and encouraged us to forge relationships with local businesses. Enormous contributions of volunteer labour and donations in kind allowed us to channel the bulk of our cash budget into artist fees, while our grassroots scale meant we were able to provide an intimate, accessible and neighbourhood-friendly atmosphere.

Centered in the Trinity Bellwoods area of Queen Street West, most of the venues were within easy walking distance of each other, and events were scheduled so that a dedicated audience could, if they wished, experience almost every performance. Only three of the events charged an admission fee. Outdoor and windowfront locations were critical to the overall success of the festival, as one of our major goals was accessibility. Performance art is largely unknown to the general public, except perhaps as an object of derision in cartoon strips and stand-up comedy routines. By putting performance art in places where people could simply happen upon it, we hoped to take away some of the mystique, confusion and suspicion that surrounds the form.

With the massive number of works and artists involved, it would be impossible to describe fairly all that happened. Recurring concerns included an emphasis on our relationships to our bodies, our surroundings and our technologies. Individual works were rich and wise, and had much to offer within their individual cultural and aesthetic frames.

Equally important, the festival context allowed works to play off each other in unexpected ways. Contrasts of scale, and the resulting differences in feel and tone, were particularly striking. So, for example, the implications of JAWA's late-night RANT party, a techno-rave complete with deafening sound system and smoke machines, could be weighed against either *dredge city*, an activated techno environment that felt rather like a rave party without the dancing, or Jin's Banana House, a wandering and winsome happening that used toy-scale and low tech sound and projection equipment to create a rave without the menace or pretention out of the back of a VW bus. Or, one might compare the feel of Elizabeth Chitty's *Progress of the Body*,

.in/attendant.

Location: .in/attendant. gallery, 962 Queen St. W.

Curator: Shannon Cochrane

5 performances

Format: performances presented in window front, gallery and exterior spaces

"Emphasis is placed on...works that utilize not only the window stage, but conceptually and physically address and activate the spaces which surround it: the gallery room behind, the outdoor spaces the window looks to, the sidewalk, the road, the park across the street....

.in/attendant. challenges the often static audience/performer dynamic that can exist in performance work, where the audience watches from a polite distance and the performer entertains from a stage."

:JAWA: bot: Machines that Perform

Location: 165 John St., 3rd Floor

Curators: Jubal Brown, Peter Flemming

8 installations, 2 performances

Format: Mechanical, robotic, electronic sculpture, installation, and single performances; late-night RANT party "MACHINES were created to replace people, to perform our menial tasks for us so we don't have to. Perhaps they are extensions of our bodies? our will? or our psychopathological inertia toward oblivion?... Given the notion that machines were made to carry out boring and repetitive tasks for us so we could do more important things with our valuable time, it seems very natural and appropriate that machines would replace performance artists whose tradition of being boring and repetitive has been well-documented."

against Jennifer Maus's *What Are You Looking At?* Both presented nighttime outdoor performances with simple repetitive performance actions and projected images, but the contrasts in scale—from Chitty's coolly intellectual monumental visual tableaux spread across a large terrain, to Maus's diaristic, intimate stage that pulled the audience in to a tightly framed focus point around her body—were markedly different in emotional affect.

Such contrasts and connections were available at every turn, sometimes by



For Dudley, Rebecca Belmore. Photo: Cheryl Rondeau.

design, often by serendipity, and no doubt also because it is the artist's job to speak of what concerns all of us. We are generally encouraged to understand contrasts of imagery or viewpoint as being oppositional. In the context of the festival, seemingly contradictory outlooks were allowed to sit together within a larger spectrum, providing a more complete picture. The net result was an inspiring new venue for performance art.

Paul Couillard is a performance artist whose work has been presented in numerous countries. As a thirteen-year veteran of the non-profit, artist-run production/distribution network, he has produced residencies, workshops, exhibitions and performances by artists from around the

world. He is currently working on a book about the radical faeries.

Notes

1. The influences contributing to this "dormant" period, while worthy of further study, are far too complex, varied and arguable to be adequately explored here. Among the factors I would cite are the following: tightening government purse strings, bureaucratization of artist-run spaces, disenchantment with the "ephemeral" nature of performance among visually based artists, an explosion of experimentation within the traditional performing arts media and a general disinterest on the part of audiences in work that was not set up as consumer-friendly entertainment.

2. The second annual festival is scheduled for August 12-16, 1998.

Prognosis

Location: Symptom Hall

Curators: Johanna Householder, Louise Liliefeldt, Derek Mohamed, Tracy Renee Stafford

9 performances

Format: cabaret performance evening, performance installations and individual performances

"Prognosis uses flexible, changeable environments to accommodate pieces using video, film, live sound, movement-based work, food and more in conjunction with performance elements.... Rather than establishing a single stage, the venues provoke a non-aggressive interaction between performers and audience as locations shift for each work."

Sediment

Location: Trinity Bellwoods Park

Curators: Terril-Lee Calder-Fujii, Jenny Keith, Derek Mohamed

9 performances

Format: outdoor performances, some repeated over several days

"Due to its location in the Garrison Creek bed, Trinity Bellwoods Park offers a wide variety of terrain... Pieces [presented in Sediment] suggest an awareness of and emphasis on concepts of time, light, place and environmental sound... Performances occur at various times and locations throughout the park, many of them taking place over several hours or days to take advantage of changes in light, temperature, weather and pedestrian traffic."

Pleasures of the Flesh: The Body in Time

Location: Symptom Hall

Coordinator: Johanna Householder

9 performances

Format: panel discussion framed by performances "This panel discussion provides a critical context for the work in the festival, focusing on why performance artists think the lessons of our bodies remain important even as many of us rush to embrace and perhaps even dwell in technological, electronic and virtual environments."

REPRESENTING DISSENT

Talking About *Politically Speaking*

BY JUDY REBICK AND KIKÉ ROACH

VANCOUVER: DOUGLAS AND MCINTYRE, 1996

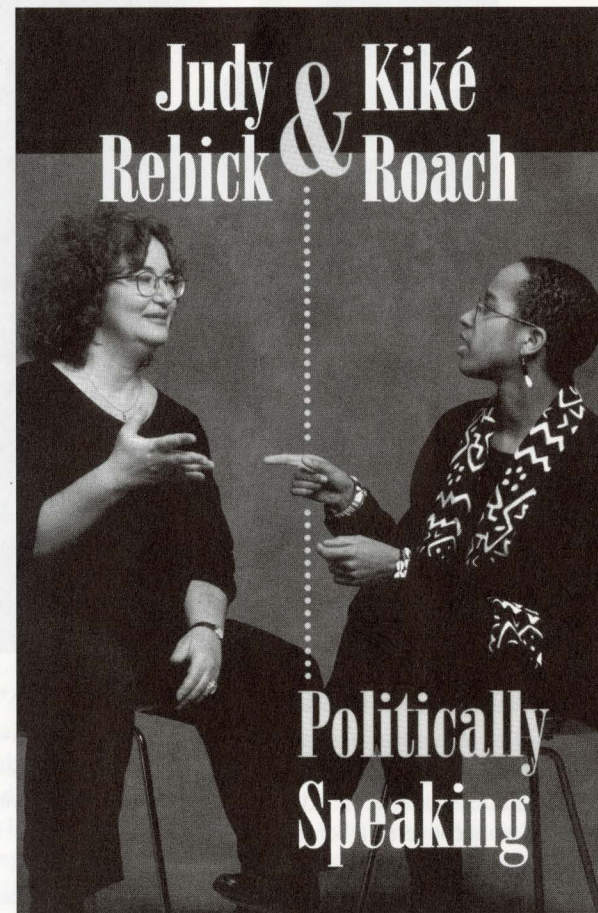
REVIEW BY MARY-JO NADEAU AND RENUKA SOOKNANAN

*Politically Speaking*¹ is a timely enterprise, and a superb example of the difficulties, tensions and pleasures of creating and representing dissent in our times. The pages of the book are filled with the charged dialogue of two experienced left/feminist/anti-racist activists. Both are highly skilled in the art of public political debate. In a little less than 200 pages, Judy Rebick and Kiké Roach represent the terrain of contemporary political, social, cultural and economic debate. In so doing, they hope to garner the attention of a popular audience by accommodating "dissenting voices" (p. 5) in ways that "the Left, equality-seeking movements" (p. 27) have sometimes failed to do.

They are grasping for something new. On the one hand, they recognize that the conditions of dissent have changed. What's distinctive about the '90s is that "neo-conservative economic policies seemed to have captured the entire political landscape" (p. 5). As "government by corporations" becomes an increasingly pernicious global reality, national standards of social security in Canada are steadily being eroded and global/national/local politics and culture are being redefined and transformed on this terrain (p. 16). As well, new forms of political talk and new practices of collective organizing have emerged in recent years. Roach and Rebick are particularly interested in articulating movements toward a counter-politics of difference and inclusivity. Such movements are replacing the more hierarchical, exclusionary, marginalizing and objectifying practices of dissent

that have characterized post-1960s left social movements, especially "white, middle-class" feminisms and "white male" socialisms. Rebick argues that "[t]he Old Left theory was imposed from the top. The New Left theory is emerging from the bottom" (p. 3). It is in this shifting space, in between the old and the new, that Roach and Rebick address themselves to the question of organizing dissent against the right and neo-conservatism while re-constituting the left into a more democratic, inclusive and plural space of activism and transformation.

Roach and Rebick are successful in sustaining a dialogue that does not marginalize the fact of difference. Their talk is replete with anecdotes and examples that reference and acknowledge that race, colonialism, gender, class, sexuality, nation and citizenship all have historical and contemporary significance as relations that constitute Canada. In this sense, they move beyond some feminist/left analyses that either pay lip-service to difference or ignore it altogether. In recognizing the multiple relations of inequality, they are able to highlight and demonstrate that hierar-



chies of privilege organize "progressive" movements. Their discussion of Canadian feminism and the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC) show this most clearly. It is here that they address the dynamics of unequal relations operating within counter-political spaces. Rebick and Roach have produced a dialogue and a conceptual framework that "speaks to a broad range of issues" (p. 91) and is a step in the direction of the kind of broadly inclusive and "multifaceted"

(p. 91) space of debate and dissent that they envision.

Nevertheless, we think it is crucial for the process of building dialogue and effective collective organizing to understand where and how significant sites of marginalization and closure are established in the text. Under the code of "postmodernism," for example, the more difficult and challenging politics of difference and representation engaged by cultural theorists/producers are hastily dismissed from the dialogue as irrelevant, privileged and dangerous. "Postmodernism" is set up as something that can be rejected on the grounds that "it ignores the reality of class divisions in society" (p. 31). This positional act allows Rebick and Roach to bypass the task of defining the field of political debate around/through "postmodernism." This rejection is very significant in understanding the limits of intellectual and political expansion that order the text—it is crucial to how their dialogue proceeds.

Toward a New Politics of Difference

To grasp the significance of this point of closure in *Politically Speaking*, it is instructive to reference Stuart Hall on the shift in black cultural politics in Britain in the mid 1980s. Hall's work highlights a shift in historical emphasis where a "new politics of representation" emerged out of an earlier phase of cultural struggle that was organized primarily around marginalized groups' collective efforts to redefine the "relations of representation."² In an earlier moment, speaking politically was organized predominantly around developing a language of opposition/resistance to combat the significant weight of historically produced exclusions and to challenge the negative imagery produced through dominant mainstream representations. For the most part, this entailed mapping out spaces for self-representation that

worked against universalizing tendencies. It involved reversing the stereotypes, producing images that were meant to be "positive" and "authentic" to replace those that were negative and distorted. In the process, it was discovered that there are major limitations to this form of representation, most notably that it works to produce a "language of binary oppositions" (*ibid.*, p. 442) that positions the terms of dissent as mostly polarized (left/right, Black/white, women/men).

We reference Hall's work here because it seems to us that the battle over representation waged in *Politically Speaking* tends toward the kind of limiting political he critiques. Chapter Two, "A Distorting Lens: Mainstream Media," reveals this tendency and is a useful point of departure for discussing the limitations in relation to the text and to this particular moment in Canadian history which the text references. As the chapter title signifies, the debate over representation here focuses primarily on the mainstream media and the way that it "ignores or distorts our reality rather than exposing the injustices we face" (p. 33). At the outset then, the mainstream media is represented as an urgent site of activism, and issues of exclusion and distortion, as they are produced in dominant discourse, are marked as primary to the struggle for representation. In their positioning, "community" and "alternative" press are mapped out principally as products of opposition to practices in the mainstream media. Since the mainstream is positioned as the paramount site of contestation in the struggle toward inclusivity, its opposite remains either outside of, or secondary in importance to, the discussion as a site of dissent.

This kind of positioning, where the poles are foregrounded, allows for an extreme lack of attention to the politics of representation that constitute how "the community" and "alternative" get established

and contested outside of mainstream venues. At one point for example, Roach comments that:

[i]n the Black communities across the country there are dozens of community newspapers. That is where people go to find out what is really going on. (p. 47)

Her invocation of "community" here, however, works to flatten out the terrain of political struggle over what/who constitutes "Black" by speaking as if Black community newspapers represent a common and known entity—they provide access to the real life of the Black community (in a way that the mainstream media fails to do). We are not disputing that much of the work of "community" and "alternative" press is organized as a corrective to mainstream media, and that this is relevant, necessary and important work. Rather, we want to call attention to the binarized conceptual model that organizes *Politically Speaking*, and to acknowledge that it often facilitates the marginalization of debates and sites of cultural production that are generated amongst and within marginalized communities and left groups.

Overall, by reading for the gaps and closures in their text, we find that the speakers' commitment to acknowledging difference does not in itself guarantee a departure from the limits of representation arising through old models. The "language of binary oppositions" through which politically speaking is imagined in their text continually enforces limits on Roach and Rebick's engagement with the complex, the contradictory and the uncertain. Multiple relations are acknowledged and admissible, but usually in an additive fashion as in Rebick's statement that:

[w]hen we look at women who face additional barriers, whether because of race, social class, sexual orientation or

disability, there is *more* inequality. (p. 89, emphasis added)

This additive model is particularly conducive to constructing debate in terms of hierarchies of oppressions where marginalization is understood as a positioning of bodies on a scale of who is more/less oppressed/privileged. By emphasizing the amount or quantity of inequality, the specific character and dynamics of unequal relations can easily be displaced and disregarded. Moreover, this model prioritizes gender in the same problematic fashion that typifies the history of white feminist politics. That is, the model positions unequal relations as "gender plus" whatever other categories (e.g., race, class, sexuality) the speaker chooses to invoke. It thereby allows categories to stand in for analysis. In a later articulation, for example, Rebick argues that:

if you're a feminist, and you understand the way patriarchy works, the notion of "natural" superiority among men, then you should be able to apply that to interracial politics, because it's the same dynamic. (p. 110)

While it is crucial to recognize the similarities in the dynamic of self/other(ing), her framing does not compel a recognition of how the history of race and racism is historically specific, and therefore how the dynamics through which it gets established and contested must be understood on their own terms.

As a way of moving beyond the impositions of binary frameworks, this cultural politics of difference seeks to:

address people through the multiple identities which they have—understanding that those identities do not remain the same, that they are frequently contradictory, that they cross-cut one another, that they tend to locate us differently at different

moments, conducting politics in the light of the contingent, in the face of the contingent....³

It is partly this kind of political discussion that Rebick and Roach's invocation of "postmodernism" is referencing and marginalizing. Indeed, their failure to realize the more radical aspects of their project resides partly in their failure to engage these debates in their dialogue. Attending to the "new politics of difference" would require the authors to pay particular attention to how positionings occur, how representations work to locate subjects in particular and definable ways, how readers resist and play within these positionings, and how contestation and dissent constitute representations. "Left postmodernism" is a political approach that thoroughly engages difference. This means that it fully recognizes the way that binary oppositions construct fixed and discrete social categories and can account for diversity but not for multiplicity and contradiction. It is in this shift in emphasis from the "old" to the "new" that it becomes possible to engage questions of difference but, as Hall admits, it is "a very difficult kind of politics to get one's head around; none of us knows how to conduct it." (*ibid.*, p. 57)

Representing Culture, Dissent, and Difference

In *Politically Speaking*, questions of cultural production are addressed in a similar fashion, beginning from and maintaining an economy of oppositions. For example, the only two substantive discussions of "the arts" focus on the challenges that marginalized groups have made to mainstream productions (i.e., *Showboat* and *Into the Heart of Africa*). We agree that these are crucial debates to engage. However, we want to indicate here how this binarized positioning allows for certain unproblematized conceptual errors.

Particularly, in the context of their discussion of *Showboat*, an underlying theme of community doesn't get explored at the level of complexity but rather dwells somewhere close to an essentialist project. Most notably, both "the Black community" (margin) and "white people" (mainstream) are invoked constantly to organize their discussion. Such a project is often predicated on commonality that seems to always already situate us in moments of "undisrupted identifications."⁴ We find then, that without permission it is entirely possible to speak fluidly, not "for" or "on behalf of," but *through* these undisrupted, stable categories of the common: "the Black community," the left/right, "people of colour," white people, women etc. The problem of working in these processes is that they name and constitute a stabilizing entity.

Nevertheless, these homogenizing tendencies are prone to being disrupted and, as Stuart Hall argues, "worked on." It is precisely the importance of this disrupting process that a postmodern agenda recognizes. A postmodern analysis pushes for and unhinges the safety of categories that have been marked as historically stable. This postmodern turn allows us to work against a de-historicizing tendency by imagining identities in movement, in flux and changing. Roach and Rebick, however, dismiss postmodernism as keeping us chained to "theorizing" and therefore "removed from the real world" (p. 30). In doing so, they can all too easily drift into the space of the unified and totalizing, a project shot through with problems of its own making.

In the context of their speaking about the controversies that arose with the staged production of *Showboat*, for instance, "Black" became a sign which allowed for a commonsensical construction of community organized through the familiar call to authenticity. Such an articulation

is made possible only while working within the defining spaces of a limited notion of identity, identity politics, and difference. In this way community is not about the possible sliding, shifting and interplay of identificatory categories which would make it possible, even urgent, to understand racial identity through class, gender, sexuality etc. Rather, what occurs in the text is the continued narrowing focus on community as an historically stable category.

While Roach, in particular, argues ideally for the plural identity of African-Canadian communities in Toronto, she and Rebick nevertheless slip into a homogenizing practice when speaking concretely of *Showboat*. Suddenly, "the Black community" or the "African-Canadian" community is imagined and operates mostly as an essentialist trope, concealing not only the multiplicity of protesters and the multi-faceted terrain of the protest, but also the multiplicity of those who attended the production. We can see how the limitation of the sign "community" imposes a homogenizing reading on the scale and magnitude of the entire event and protest. Rebick, for example, argues that "[t]he Black community in Toronto opposed the production of *Showboat*," when it was actually particular groups in "the Black community" who mobilized (p. 75). Moreover, this limiting sign of "the Black community" attaches the politics of anti-racism to Black bodies and thereby conceals the multi-ethnic, multi-racial composition of self-defined anti-racist protesters/activists (e.g., Anti-Racist Action, Black Action Defense Committee, York University students and faculty members, members of the Jane-Finch community, International Socialists). Recognizing this aspect of the protest would make it more difficult to invoke the homogenizing category of "the mainstream," as in the instance where Roach argues that "we don't see white people

standing up speaking out on issues of racial injustice" (p. 115).

Elsewhere in the text, we agree with Roach who argues against Rebick's claim that the production is simply a musical, and therefore not a site for anti-racist activism. Unlike Rebick, Roach's argument articulates the ways in which representation, difference and "race" work in the context of a racist culture. It is true that the focus of the anti-racist argument was that the musical is an exemplification of histories being rewritten, cultural tamperings and a disregard for the violence perpetuated by these limitations. These forms of misrepresentations are about a context of violence that, historically, framed the American anti-slavery struggles. With the production of *Showboat*, this history is sanitized; the different levels of complexity diminished. So the characterizations become timeless, acceptable through lyrical performances.

It is important for us to focus on Roach and Rebick's failure to examine the representational categories they use to position the debate. Their speaking does not engage the rather pressing questions of multi-racial political organizing or the multi-relational dynamics of dissent. Multiplicity entails recognizing the way that dissent is organized through multiple and contradictory relations such as class, race, gender, sexuality etc. It attends to defining how projects and utterances of dissent get put together in these terms. How does a particular organizing moment engage (or fail to engage) gender? class? race? What is being established and contested? On whose/what terms and in whose name?

And finally, we want to call attention to the way that a binarized focus on the politics of margin/mainstream tends to marginalize a discussion of cultural production which does not focus primarily on a critique of the mainstream. In

Politically Speaking, there is almost no engagement with theatre, music, visual arts, film and literature that are produced from, and address themselves primarily to, the margins. What gets lost here is a whole realm of political and cultural debate that is produced in/through these spaces.

Marginalia, Whiteness and Difference

Rebick and Roach recognize that the relationship between belonging and identity is a central aspect of how the margins begin to speak, but an underlying tension is detectable in the text as they try to articulate how the margins can be understood as a crucial site for organizing an inclusive collective politics of resistance and dissent. Much of the tension is related to the fact that their analysis begins from the commonsensical claim that the process of identification, at least for "progressive" people (e.g., feminists, anti-racists, the left), is an identification with marginalization. This is what Rebick expressed:

I don't identify as being white. When I see a white woman running for political office, I don't identify with her on racial grounds. I wouldn't vote for her because she's white, but I might vote for her because she's a woman. (pp. 77-78)

In this articulation, she wouldn't identify with whiteness because it is not a marginalized identity. This model of identification allows her to treat the margins as a place of retreat from whiteness, rather than as a place where whiteness is engaged. This classic disavowal closes off the space for recognizing whiteness as a racial construct.

For Roach, the urgency to dialogue about whiteness is to ensure that it gets acknowledged as a relation of domination and privilege. Throughout the text, she

pushes for full recognition of the presence of the centre in silences:

We do have a dominant culture. It's Anglo culture. People who come here, even other European people, have to fit into that culture. Being white means that they can fit in better. Nobody ever talks about that. Nobody talks about the fact that we still live in a colonial place. (p. 78)

The passage is a demonstration of Roach's persistence in ensuring that whiteness is situated in the dialogue and on the agenda of dissent generally—that the fissures where white privilege resides are made visible. This persistence references the extent to which racism has been able to slip outside of “progressive” dialogue, in left and feminist politics in Canada. For Roach, the margins is a familiar place from which to express a particular version of anti-racism. It is assumed that Black subjectivity is already located in the margins as an oppressed identity.

We want to raise a concern with Rebeck's and Roach's conceptualization of the margins. They both tend to position the margins as an already constituted space that encompasses bodies that can lay claim to histories of marginalization (e.g., Black, woman, lesbian, poor). As such, they make it very difficult to imagine and speak about how privileged identities (e.g., white, male, heterosexual, middle-class) could take up a politics of resistance from the margins. Moreover, positioning the margins in these terms constrains us to conceptualize ourselves as discrete moments of being and identification (i.e., I am white, I am woman...) rather than as multiply located subjects with contradictory identifications with oppression/privilege (i.e., Black, middle-class, straight woman). For example, Rebeck and Roach's engagement with the politics of class and sexuality as cross-cutting race

and gender is minimal, and we feel that this is an effect of their comprehension of the margins.

Their framing cannot accommodate a cultural politics of difference, which seeks to make visible the instability of the margins and seeks to interrogate how projects of resistance and dissent are organized through our multiple and contradictory identifications. For a cultural politics of difference, the margins are about processes of politicization and the spaces of dissent that we make. We resist frameworks that position the margins as naturalized places of identification where one's politics can be placed beyond scrutiny. The margins require that we recognize the histories of marginalization/privileging within which we are positioned through social relations, but such a position does not guarantee a politics of resistance or dominance. It is in this sense, historically speaking, that we can talk about a cultural politics of difference as something “new.”

Renuka Sooknanan is a graduate student at York University in the Department of Sociology.

Mary-Jo Nadeau lives in Toronto. She works and studies at York University where she is also active in union, student and campus politics.

Notes

1. Judy Rebeck and Kiké Roach, *Politically Speaking* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1996).
2. Stuart Hall, “New Ethnicities,” in David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen eds., *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, (London: Routledge, 1996).
3. Stuart Hall, “Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities,” in Anthony D. King ed., *Culture, Globalization and the World System* (New York: Department of Art and Art History, 1991) p. 59.
4. Renuka Sooknanan, “The Politics of Immigrant Women's Volunteer Work: Imagined Community, State, Citizenship,” unpublished manuscript, 1997.

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- Orange County Register**
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“Orly made countless introductions...”
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Art/Exhibitions

- Foo, Kuan
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- Foo, Kuan
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- Golden, Anne
“Pop Goes the Breast Surgery,” review, no. 5 (46-48)

- Griggers, Camilla & Nell Tenhaaf
“Studiolo,” *Studiolo: The Collaborative Work of Martha Fleming and Lyne Lapointe*, by Martha Fleming, with Lyne Lapointe and Lesley Johnstone, Artexes Editions, Montreal, 1997) book review, no. 4 (47-48)

- Hill, R. William
“Reformation,” Michael Belmore exhibition at Garnet Press, review, no. 1 (39-40)

- Ingram, Gordon Brent
“Public Art and Homelessness,” (*Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics*, by Rosalyn Deutsche, MIT Press, 1996), book review, no. 3 (47-48)

- Jim, Alice Ming Wai
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- Koh, Karlyn
“Transmission Ruses,” *small, medium and not large*, books and collages, 1982 to present by Laiwan, review, no. 1 (41-43)

- Lee, Robert & Lee Rodney
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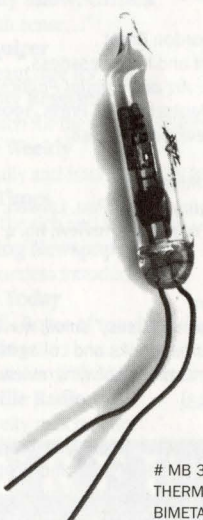
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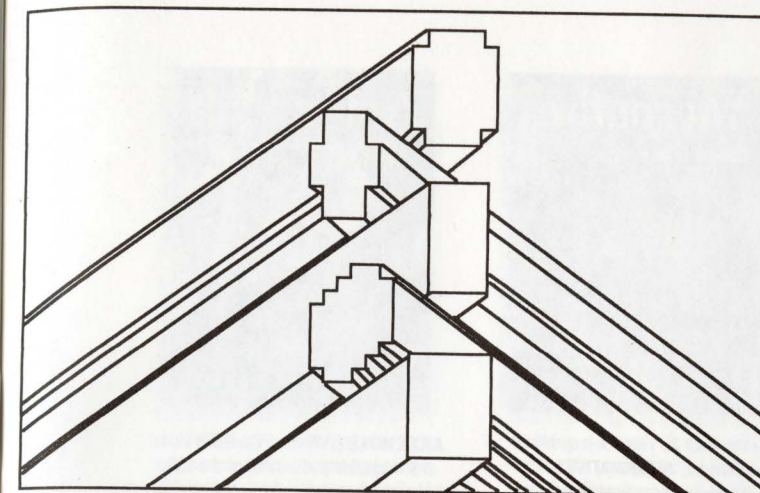
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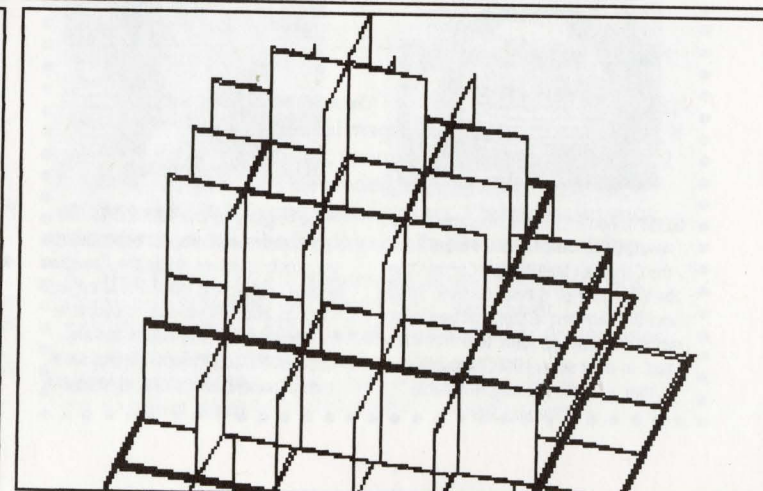
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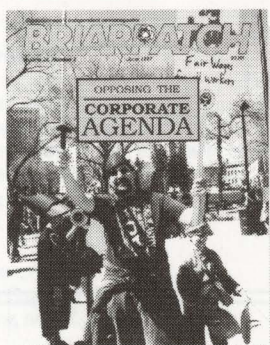


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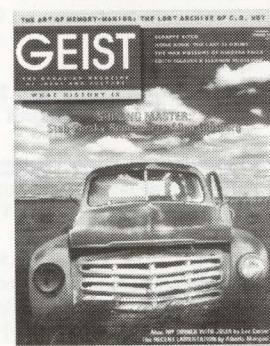
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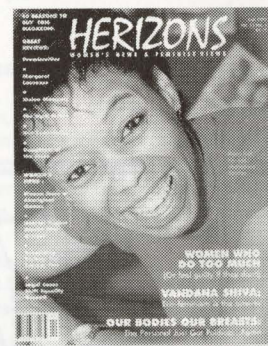
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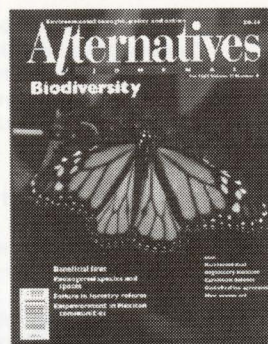
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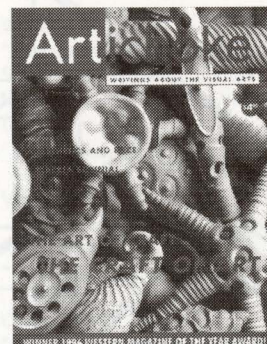
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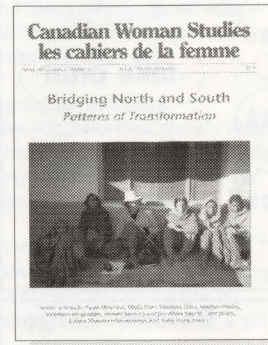
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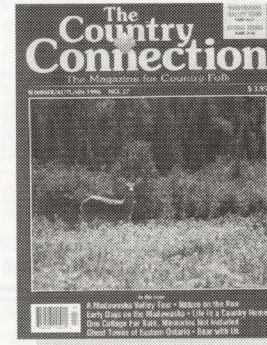
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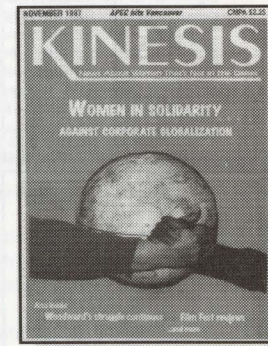
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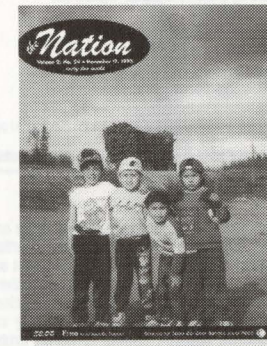
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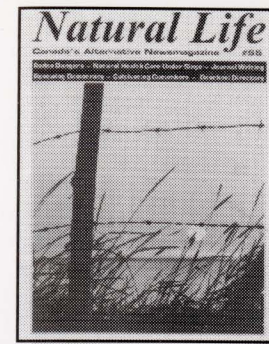
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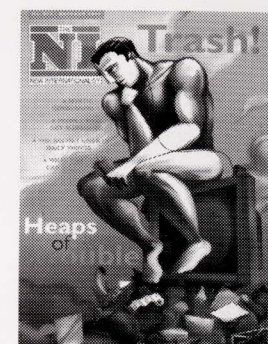
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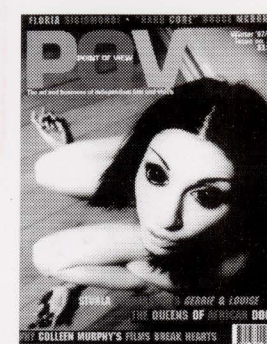
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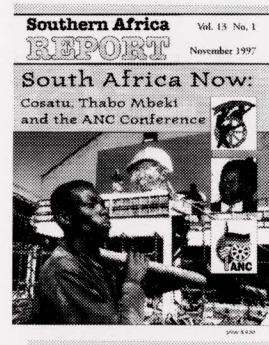
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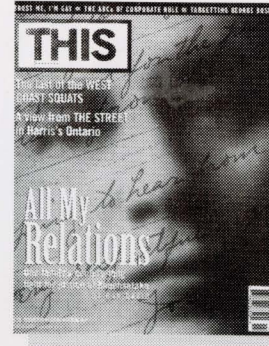
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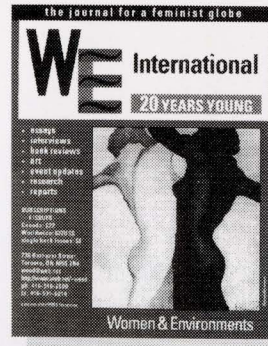
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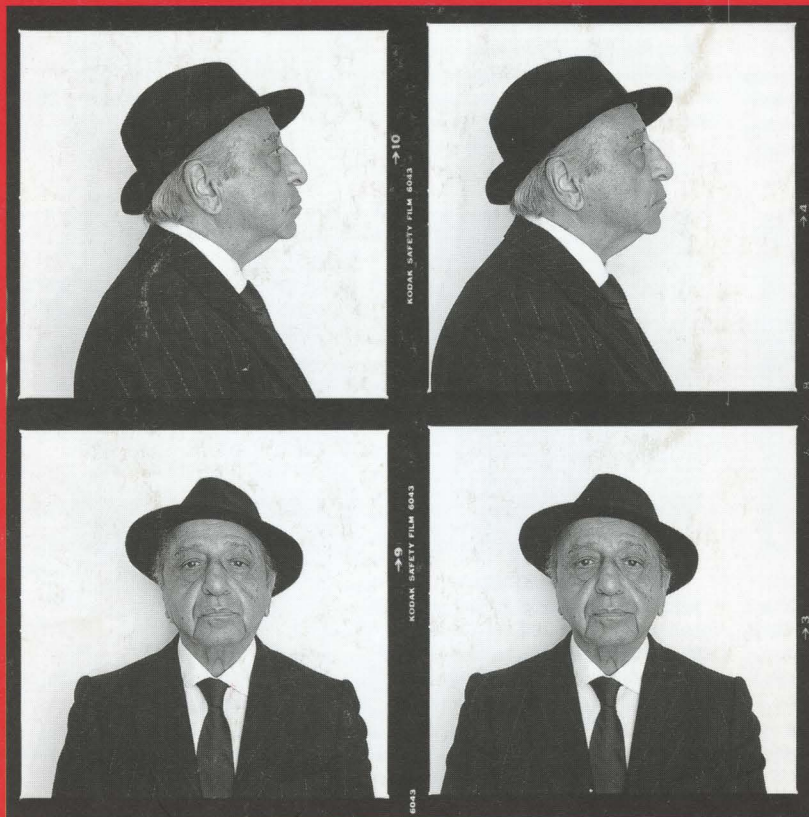
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