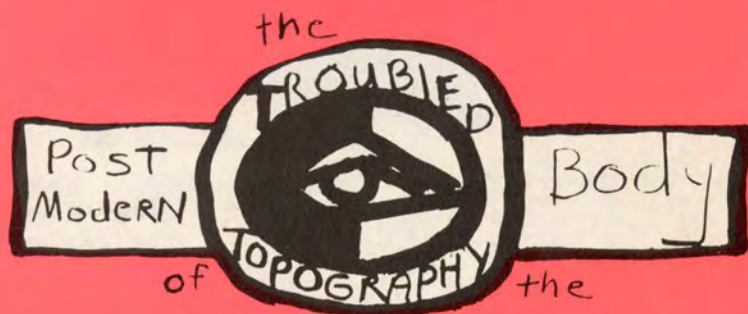


# FUSE

MAGAZINE

SPRING 1990 Vol. XIII No. 4

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ayanna black

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to the  
Montreal  
killings

by  
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VOL. XIII No. 4

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## letters

FUSE welcomes letters to the Editors. All letters are subject to editing.

To the Editors:

I was really pleased to see the generous coverage of the P.E.N. Congress in your last issue. (FUSE Vol. XIII No. 3) Three whole feature pieces, imagine. Still, I have to tell you that as I read the pieces by Joyce Nelson, Marlene Nourbese Philip and Ayanna Black, I did so with mounting frustration. While none of these correspondents felt it her obligation to cover the entire event or all the issues it raised, even about race, (and I would not suggest that any one person could) I would have thought that FUSE, which published Joane Cardinal-Schubert's "In the Red" and so many of Marlene Nourbese Philip's ground-breaking pieces on discrimination, might have at least mentioned *Changers: A Spiritual Renaissance*, the exhibition of Native women artists that was on view at the York Quay Gallery as part of the Congress.

Instead silence. Even though all three writers knew about the show, which was organized by the National Indian Arts and Crafts Corporation, and curated by New Brunswick printmaker Shirley Bear, none chose to acknowledge its existence.

In addition to arranging for the exhibition to be on throughout the month of September, the Writers in Prison Committee also raised the funds to bring the artists to town for the opening performance event and we hoped their presence in the city would lead to some serious and comprehensive coverage of their work. While I can't say I am surprised that we failed to get the Art Crowd critics to pay attention or take an interest in the work of Native artists, I am dumbfounded that FUSE turned up its collective nose at the show.

Yours sincerely, Susan Crean, Vancouver

Bravol

for your current issue (PEN, Africa, et al. . .). How could I have been missing FUSE all these years. Your coverage and quality of writing and interpretation are superb. Keep it up.

John Marshall, Toronto

Dear Editor:

Hazel Da Breo's behind-the-scenes look at the development of the ROM's current big exhibition, *Into the Heart of Africa*, proved quite informative, and would be a useful precedent for the reviewers of other exhibitions to follow. ("Royal Spoils," FUSE Vol. XIII No. 3).

Her attempt to place the exhibition in a larger historical and museological context is entirely appropriate and welcome. However, I was astonished to read that it was Alexander the Great who initiated "the capture and destruction of Africa" when he "invaded Egypt and looted the Royal Library at Alexandria, carrying off a booty of scientific, philosophical and religious books" in the year 333 B.C. (p.31).

The truth is that Alexander founded Alexandria (332 B.C.) and that the city was named after him. As for the famous library, it was founded after Alexander's death by Ptolemy I (305-283 B.C.). How Ms. Da Breo could have made such an egregious error is difficult to understand. It makes one wonder about the truth of the other, more sweeping historical assertions that she makes in her article.

Yours truly, Steven Spencer, Toronto

Dear FUSE:

I purchased a copy of your Winter issue because I was interested in the Da Breo article about the ROM's *Into the Heart of Africa* show. I was not disappointed. I had heard rumours of troubles at ROM over the show, but couldn't get to the bottom of it all. My congratulations to Ms. Da Breo for a very illuminating article and to FUSE for featuring it.

Sincerely, Jack Mills

Hello FUSE people:

Thanks for two years of great alternate arts coverage. It was wonderful to find, I've enjoyed it. One note: I've noticed in the last six months to a year that there has been an increasing focus on Toronto and Montreal, exclusively almost. How about better coverage of Edmonton (home of Canada's only women's film festival—*Insight*, as well as other alternate art co-ops) and Vancouver, Calgary, the North—you know, the rest of Canada!

Thanks, Dorothy Hennevel, Edmonton

LETTERS CONTINUE ON PAGE 4

## Errata

In our re-print of the Next Generation's statement (Vol. XIII No. 3 p.24) Chinelo Achebe was misprinted as Chinua Achebe. We apologize for this error.

In Joyce Nelson's article on the P.E.N. congress ("Trouble in Mondo Condo" Vol. XIII, No. 3) David McIntosh was wrongly identified as a member of P.E.N. Canada. McIntosh has informed us that he was hired on a short term contract to administer certain aspects of the P.E.N. congress and that he does not in fact qualify for membership in P.E.N. Canada. We apologize for the error.

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## letters CONTINUED

Re: "Homomyopia" (FUSE Vol. XIII No. 1 & 2)

I was disappointed that Andrew Sorfleet passed over the different works in Mercer Union's *Homogenius* exhibition without giving any real attention to any of them. (Only four works were even mentioned in the review.) It's fair enough to deal in depth with a catalogue article alone—in this case, Tom Folland's essay which accompanied the show—but not when it's presented, as Sorfleet's article was, as a review of the exhibition. This is more troubling when, as Sorfleet says, the work in the exhibition "struggles with a lack of visibility in dominant culture." But how can the dominant culture be criticized for this when the same situation is continued by Sorfleet's own writing?

This omission makes me wary of most of what Sorfleet argues historically and politically. If his theoretical and political commitments aren't able to come to grips at all with the actual works produced by gay artists living our history here, it makes those commitments appear hopelessly abstract. One last quibble: it was odd to read that "it must be difficult for the visual arts community, still dealing with its homophobia, to have some of its veteran and up-coming members declare themselves 'out'." Since the opening itself was treated by many as a long overdue celebration, I'm curious where Sorfleet got that impression. And far from being the occasion when different artists came out, as far as I can recall, none of these artists have kept their sexuality a secret from the community or from their own work—which is in part why they were able in their different ways to contribute so much over the years. I had the sense that Sorfleet wanted it to be difficult. Personally, I don't see how it helps the situation along by representing it as worse than it is.

Andy Patton, Toronto

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# Je me souviens:

## A RESPONSE TO THE MONTREAL KILLINGS

by Marusia Bociurkiw

Police have no motive for [the gunman's] hatred of women.

*The Toronto Star*, Dec. 7, 1989

It's late afternoon at the end of term. You're 23 years old, a woman, an engineering student at the top of your class. A man in hunting gear enters the classroom. Some stupid engineering prank no doubt, but you're too tired to laugh, you just want to get home, have a shower, go out with your friends. "You're all a bunch of fucking feminists!" he screams. Why is he screaming? Why are all the men leaving the room, why don't they stop him, he's firing shots into the air, and you're shouting, "No, you're wrong, we're not feminists, stop shooting. . ."

You're 30, you're 43, you're 50, you're reading the paper, or someone calls you, you can't believe it, you're numb, or you feel angry. You're a feminist. You've spent five, or 10, or 15 years going to meetings, organizing demos, publishing/writing/fundraising/speaking/marching. Suddenly, you're tired, or you're burnt out, or demoralized, and you cry for the deaths of 14 young women you've never met. You grieve also for the literal expression of a hatred for feminism that you know to be embedded in your culture. You feel targeted. Your heart feels cold.

It's an isolated incident, the act of a deranged person. . .

Monique Gagnon-Tremblay,  
Quebec Minister of Immigration

On December 6, 1989, a 25-year-old man named Marc Lepine entered a classroom at the University of Montreal, asked the men to leave, and shot the six remaining women. He then wandered the building, killing eight more women, and injuring 13 others. Finally, he shot himself. A three-page note found on his body described the mass murder as a political act, and blamed feminism for ruining his life. It included a "hit list" of 15

prominent Quebecoise women. Lepine would have also liked to kill, including a founder of the now-defunct feminist magazine, *La Vie En Rose*, as well as Monique Gagnon-Tremblay.

For about five days after the shooting, feminism was named, discussed, and (to some extent) made visible in the dominant news media in an unprecedented manner. Articles with headlines like: "Misogyny Gone Crazy," "Culture Condoned Violence Against Women, Children," and "Anti-feminism Part of Conservative Revival"



Response to the Montreal killings (above) and charges against Durham in the shooting of Sophia Cooke (below).

Photos by Sandra Haas.



adorned the newspapers like so many memorial wreaths. For anyone who had ever spent five months organizing a feminist event only to see it hidden in the back pages of the newspapers, the irony was almost too much to take. By December 12, there was no more mention of the murders or of feminism, but an illusion of progressive democracy (within which, supposedly, feminism flourishes) was maintained.

Not at all surprisingly, the news reports either individualized Lepine's violence (he was introverted, had a violent father and watched war videos), or named violence towards women as the symptom and media imagery (porn, sexist cartoons, etc.) as the cause. Representatives from liberal or radical feminist groups like Metro Toronto Action Committee on Violence Against Women and Children and the Canadian Coalition Against Media Pornography (CCAMP) were asked to comment on the killings. "Lepine is just at one end of the spectrum of violence. Pornography in a way is a form of violence against women, and it goes from there right up the continuum," said Rose Potvin of the CCAMP (*The Toronto Star*, Dec. 8, 1989). With the zeal of the newly-converted, spokesmen for the hastily-formed Toronto Men's Forum spoke to reporters about violence towards women, as though they had just discovered it. That same week, the NDP took on gun control, and the Conservatives took on pornography. Like flies hov-

Photos by Sandra Hoar.



ering over dead corpses, politicians of every stripe exploited the murders. The aftermath was almost as depressing as the event itself.

I and my colleagues will draw the appropriate lessons from the senseless deaths of these promising young women... Pornography does need to be controlled, and we plan to ask Parliament, again, to act on this issue...

Barbara McDougall, Minister responsible for the Status of Women

At a time when gay-bashing and police violence towards the Black community is on the rise, talk of video or gun control is strategically inadequate. It is strategic because it diverts attention from what is really an organized move by the Right (and its liberal collaborators) to push back the gains made by feminist, anti-racist, and gay liberation

movements. It is inadequate because it doesn't deal with what is necessary: grassroots feminist education and funding for (as opposed to cutbacks to) organizations that have been doing this work for years (feminist periodicals, rape crisis centres, women's centres). What we need to be talking about is coalition politics, and how to work together to fight state (or state-sanctioned) violence, *not* how to license videos or guns. At a Toronto rally in support of Sophia Cooke (a young Black woman shot by a policeman), activist Himani Bannerji drew connections between the two events. "Marc Lepine was dressed in uniform too," she said. "The similarities are not accidental. The police are

racist and anti-feminist in the same way that Marc Lepine hated women. He drew his gun in the same way that the police draw their guns against us."

Marc Lepine may have been a lone fanatic, but he could easily have been a hired killer. He could have been a member of the Conservative Party, or a neo-Nazi white supremacist. Worst of all, he could have been a normal guy.

What a killing like this can also do is to distract attention from on-going genocide. Much was made of the fact that the 14 women killed had everything going for them; that they had "broken through a barrier" (*CBC radio*, Dec. 10, 1989); that "everything seemed to assure them of a brilliant future" (*The Toronto*



Two store owners respond to the massacre.

*Sun*, Dec. 12, 1989); that they were young, healthy, and successful. Without diminishing the horror and waste of these women's deaths, and the unimaginable grief inflicted upon their families, friends, and lovers, it is important to examine the dynamics of the response. The deaths of 14 white, relatively privileged young women was recognized as a national tragedy, while recent police shootings of Black people have been dismissed either as an accident or a necessary evil. Meanwhile poverty, that insidious hired gunman of the state, stalks women daily.

Jean Swanson, a B.C. poverty rights activist, describes the ways in which poor women are on the front lines of right-

wing attack; an attack whose consequences are, without exaggeration, disease and early death: "We are the people who work at necessary jobs, cleaning, serving, and caring. Yet we continue to live in poverty because our wages are so low, because Big Business groups are using us as soldiers to battle inflation. Our babies and our children... pay with an infant mortality rate that is twice as high as it is for other Canadians. Adults pay. We pay with a shorter life expectancy. We pay with our suffering. The poorest 20 per cent of Canadians have more of nearly every disease than other Canadians." (*Kinesis*, May 1989)

It is more important than ever that we know who is targeting whom. Canadian neo-

Conservative groups have become vocal, explicit, and highly-organized in their condemnation of abortion rights, gays, lesbians, and immigrants. They see the connections many don't. Ted Byfield, an Alberta white supremacist writes: "Our birth rate plunges and we must import more people to populate the country... on a scale so massive that preserving any of the country's cultural traditions will be impossible." He asks that "governments stop force-feeding us with feminism," and decries the public school system as a "vehicle for the unimpeded dissemination of feminist propaganda." (*Western Report*). The guy may have a few facts wrong, but his views are not at all at odds

with either Lepine's or Mulroney's agenda.

If I speak to you in anger, at least I have spoken to you: I have not put a gun to your head and shot you down on the street. I have not looked at your bleeding sister's body and asked, "What did she do to deserve this?"

Audre Lorde, *Sister/Outsider*

For days after the shooting, many of us are unable to sleep as sadness, anger, and grief overcomes us. A friend finds herself wondering about the men who left the classroom just before the shooting, and about how Lepine was able to roam the building, virtually unchallenged. We talk about men leaving; leaving the house in the morning; leaving behind responsibility for child-rearing, for women's economic inequality, for feminist activism, and for women's lives. We rarely see the men we know at pro-choice rallies, at feminist fundraisers, at actions against rape or police violence. We never see them organizing support for feminist issues. Instead, we find that most men continue to participate in a myriad of subtle and not-so-subtle actions that conspire to keep many of us excluded, voiceless, or poor.

The mood is austere. For the first time since those kick-ass days in the '70s, we're seeing where the lines are drawn.

These lines are uncomfortably visible in communities of women, as well. The voices of anti-porn feminists drown out those of us who have been targeted by the anti-porn agenda. Lesbianism makes a come-back as an epithet. At a vigil in Toronto, a heterosexual woman describes an inci-



dent of harassment (sic). "They called me a feminist dyke," she complains.

A fierce essentialism emerges. Racism isn't mentioned. Crucial connections aren't made. And yet we find ourselves wanting to draw together, make the circle again, and hold one another as we mourn. The fear is that we won't move on into activism, and that, claiming unity, we ignore difference. The hope is that we will rebuild feminist community in a way that can include supportive strategies so necessary in these hard political times. There have already been so many casualties; too many feminist periodicals and collectives have collapsed, winded by a combination of under-funding, infighting, and exhaustion. Our anger at the massacre can begin to fuel our awareness, and our desire for social change. In her article "Uses of Anger," Audre Lorde describes anger as being full of "information and energy," which moves us into speech. She makes distinctions between hatred and anger: "Hatred is the fury of those who do not share our goals, and its object is death and destruction. Anger is a grief of distortions between peers, and its object is change."

Marc Lepine said, "You're all a bunch of fucking feminists." The only way to avenge his hateful, terrorist act is to prove him right. And to organize, along feminist and anti-racist lines, in every corner of our communities. ■

**Marusia Bociurkiw is a feminist artist, writer & activist living in Toronto.**

# Speaking of Colour

## IMAGE & NATION Festival of Gay & Lesbian Film and Video

by Molly Shinhat

**MONTREAL**—Image and Nation II: The Montreal International Festival of Gay and Lesbian Cinema and Video took this city by storm from November 2-12. Held at the Goethe Institute, the NFB Cinema and the Cinéma-thèque Québécoise, this year's festival went a long way towards establishing the event as a permanent one. Over 60 films and videos were screened, the majority of which were made in North America and Europe. Taking a bold step forward, this year the organizers, Diffusions Gaies et Lesbiennes du Québec (DGLDQ), chose to engage in the debates and questions around the representation(s) of gays and lesbians of colour.

On average, 80 per cent of the seats in the cinemas were filled for every screening, giving this year's festival the highest attendance rating yet. The total number of tickets sold stands at about 4,200. The first attempt to revive and consolidate the festival was made in 1987, but endeavors to hold such a festival can be traced back to 1980. Unlike this year's festival, early at-

tempts did not manage to attract either a high level of community funding or mass audiences. In 1986, two small festivals were held—one at the Université de Montréal, organized by Pierre Chackal; the other, organized by René Lavoie, at the Cinéma-thèque Québécoise. Through Concordia film professor Thomas Waugh, the two were subsequently put in touch with a group of women who wanted to organize a lesbian film and video festival. The efforts of their work throughout 1987 resulted in the first major festival of Gay and Lesbian Cinema and Video (1988). The approximate ticket sales that year levelled off at about 3,000. The outstanding debt of \$500-600 was later absorbed by the individuals in the organizing group.

This year, with the added energy of new members, the group wrote up stacks of grant applications to all three levels of government. In the meantime, the organizing group initiated a massive outreach to gay and lesbian businesses in the Montreal area. While this consumed a lot of time, ulti-

mately the festival would never have taken place without it. Bars, video clubs, city councillors, banks, hotels, restaurants, bookstores—even Studio D of the National Film Board—bought ads in the festival catalogue. These paid for a substantial part of festival costs. The Cinéma-thèque Québécoise agreed to hold its week of gay and lesbian cinema in conjunction with the festival so it picked up some of the costs of bringing in films and guests.

The only other money the group received was the paltry sum of \$1,140 from the Canada Council, designated for subsidizing the travel expenses of guests travelling to Montreal from other Canadian cities. Significantly, all levels of government DGLDQ applied to are known to fund one or more of the other film festivals in Montreal. None of the organizers publicly allege homophobia, but, they say, the facts are the facts and in this case the fact is that government funding from the various departments simply did not materialize.

As part of the programming,



Panelists Midi Onodera, Isaac Julien, Richard Fung and Michelle Parkerson.

a panel discussion called, "Representation, Responsibility and Moveable Margins" was held halfway through the festival. Chaired by Jose Arroyo, a professor of cinema at Concordia University, the panel consisted of the following film and video makers: Richard Fung and Midi Onodera, of Toronto; Isaac Julien, from London, England; and Michelle Parkerson, from the U.S. All the panel members were gay or lesbian and Black or Asian, probably the first time such a panel has been convened in Canada.

A discussion was supposed to follow a brief address from the chair and each of the panel members. However, the entire process became bogged down in the process of translation. Part of the problem may have been the translator's unfamiliarity with the terminology of cinema and representation. It may also have been nervousness. Given the funding problems, DGLDQ could not afford to hire a professional translator. The fact is that sections of the panelists' papers were mistranslated on occasion, sometimes to the point of completely altering

what the person was saying. At one point in his presentation, Isaac Julien spoke about the violent impact of the white man's gaze on the Black man's body. The translator mistranslated one of the racial identities of the two figures involved. In addition, the theatrical and, on occasion, comic delivery of the translator bordered on the catastrophic; for example, by ending a segment of translation saying, "Well, some people might not agree that that's what s/he said, . . . but that's roughly what s/he said" or ". . . but that's what I think s/he said."

Most of the people in the room seemed to be bilingual: frequently members of the audience would shout out corrections. My greatest continuing fear centres on what completely incorrect impressions and information unilingual francophones left with—not only of what was said but also of how it was said. When the translator searched for the right words, there were times when it was difficult to tell whether the audience was laughing at what was being said or at the difficulties the translator was having. The difficulty of hold-

ing serious discussion in this environment persisted. Members of the organizing committee that could have done the translation were no doubt suffering from burn-out already. Hopefully, the resources available to the group will be increased for next year's festival so that this regrettable situation will not be repeated.

Midi Onodera, a Japanese-Canadian, spoke in detail about how a white perspective had been imposed on her as a result of her parents' background. In particular, she referred to the impact of her family's internment during World War II. Within the gay and lesbian movement, she discovered how her concerns were different from her white gay and lesbian contemporaries. The questions around sexual orientation in an Asian context and vice versa continue to be areas she explores in her work. She discussed the newness of the whole debate around questions of race and sexuality to her. She concluded that the purpose of the panel was, for her, more about trying to answer questions on a personal rather than a global level.

Isaac Julien spoke about the process that debates around Black identity have gone through in Britain. Racism has dictated that Black and British are two incompatible elements. Black British art practice was, therefore, on the whole, centred on challenging this construct and establishing the right to be both Black and British. The desire now is to move beyond that, beyond a critique of contemporary racism and to concentrate on cultural construction. It is within this space that Julien's interest in memory, archive, and reconstruction take place.

In addition, it has been accepted that no essence of Blackness exists. At the present time in Black British cinema, there are two general forms of practice: One is realist and documentary-oriented and makes the Black subject the centre of the film; the other confronts the latter, and leaving racial essentialism behind, questions the social construction of race, and celebrates plurality and difference with respect to class, sexuality and gender.

Because he tires of having to repeat the same analyses

Photo of Isaac Julien by Sunil Gupta. Other photos courtesy DGLDQ.



over and over again, Richard Fung decided to review *Jesus de Montreal* by Denis Arcand for his presentation. He chose it randomly—not because he thought Arcand had any malicious intent but because it just happened to be the last film he had seen. His review focused on the part of a Black woman. She fit right into mainstream representation of Black people. The audience at the Cineplex laughed at her because they knew her: they had seen her before in *Gone with the Wind* and on cereal boxes. Fung used this example to illustrate the kinds of racism that permeate cinema—either a glaring absence of people of colour or, as in *Jesus de Montreal*, a series of narrow stereotypes.

In his videotape, *Chinese Characters*, one man (in the tape) says that he thinks he has the smallest penis in the world. This happens to be a stereotype of Asian men. Fung decided to include the comment because, though racism and homophobia dominate the mass media, we cannot produce only positive images. At the same time, he cautioned against creating images that would be prime candidates for co-optation into a racist discourse.

Fung ended by situating the subject and audience of his work as specifically Asian. The decision came out of the realization that in doing outreach to general audiences, the audience Fung is trying to reach becomes constructed as passive. He made several other points about audience. Working in community media does

not mean the community will like the product. Part of this is a function of what people are used to, and part of it comes out of the sensitivity everyone has to representation(s) around her/his identity.

Michelle Parkerson's paper, "Answering the Void," was written two years ago. Her observations centered on Black American audiences, images of Black Americans on film through history and the role of Black feminist filmmakers. She began by describing the work of Black independent filmmakers and feminist filmmakers. Black feminist filmmakers were the first to see that film and video no longer solely serve as entertainment and were the first to use film to validate their experience and history, she said.

Film is a potential vehicle of social change that can be used to demystify the Afro-American experience and bring out the depth and diversity of some of our unsung artists. During the silent era, there were a number of films made with a Black crew and cast made for segregated audiences. Most of the crew were male. For a long time, Black women were images on the screen, or spectators—rarely imagemakers.

At the end of her presentation, Parkerson presented a short clip from a tape she is in the process of completing. It featured Black American writer Audre Lorde reading from her work and taking part in a writing workshop. ■

**Molly Shinhat is a journalist living in Montreal.**



Maureen White in *Pope Joan*.

## 10 Years & 5 Minutes NIGHTWOOD Celebrates a Decade of Feminist Theatre

by Susan G. Cole

Nightwood Theatre, on the brink of its 10th birthday, is in the throes of a pre-teen identity crisis. The small company, created as a creative laboratory for four feminist theatre artists, has, over the years, substantially transformed its original concept. And with its umbrella hovering over a burgeoning population of writers and performers, the company

is grappling with some fundamental questions. How does a theatre company remain true to its alternative roots while fulfilling a political mandate of reaching out to a large audience? How does it function within a theatre community unfamiliar and sometimes hostile to feminist principles? For that matter, how can any theatre company leaping into

the '90s function in an arts climate that offers neither the capitalist rewards of, say, Broadway, or the socialist rewards of guaranteed state support?

The founders of Nightwood were concerned with other matters when they got together 10 years ago. Through disparate experiences, Maureen White, Kim Renders, Mary Vingoe and Cynthia Grant had learned one of the key facts of artistic life for women: A female theatre artist needs the support and inspiration of other women. No matter how brilliant or driven, a woman simply cannot get heard without it. This realization, added to their shared interest in artistic risk, theatrical collaboration and feminist collectivity, helped give birth to Nightwood.

Nightwood's first work was an adaption of Sharon Riis's *The True Story of Ida Johnson*. The multi-media event illuminating the relationship between two women and their worlds broke new ground. The play used slides in ways that pushed the limits of linear narrative and challenged conventional theatrical formats. It presented the complexity and problematic nature of women's relationships.

Gradually other women were sparked by the Nightwood collective. Mary Durkan, Banuta Rubess and Ann-Marie MacDonald, to name only a few, became a part of the first wave that significantly widened the sphere of the original group. Among their projects were two productions that took aim at the



Banuta Rubess in *This is for you, Anna*.

patriarchal church. *Pope Joan*'s sexual irony celebrated the controversial ninth century female pontiff and *Smoke Damage* explored the devastation of the witch hunts. These early '80s productions used Nightwood as a collective laboratory, and emphasized the need for a feminist company on the theatre scene, for no other troupes were confronting such issues as church violence and hypocrisy from women's perspectives.

During the same period, another Nightwood collective, Ann-Marie MacDonald, Banuta Rubess, Maureen White and others, began brewing *This Is For You, Anna*, an imagistic tale of a mother's revenge against her child's sex killer. The piece was developed with workers in the area of violence against women and presented at shelters for assaulted women. With the presentation of the Anna Project at the DuMaurier International Theatre Festival in 1986, Nightwood had what any commercially-oriented type might call a hit.

The new audiences and the increasing number of artists under Nightwood's wing forced the company to wonder whether Nightwood could fulfill all the dimensions of its feminist mandate at the same time. The company had grown in such a way that it had to consider more closely how it could remain accountable to its community. Nightwood had been operating as a loose collective. The structure, which worked well for a small group, couldn't be expected to function for Nightwood's





Photo courtesy Nightwood Theatre.

**Derek Boyes & Beverley Cooper in  
*Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*.**

slowly changing political priorities. In 1985, Nightwood established a board of directors, employed a general manager as its first paid staff and hired Mary Vingoe as its first artistic coordinator.

The founders agonized over every aspect of the move. The decision to make sure that artists were always represented equally on the board helped to stem the panic over what they worried might become a serious loss for feminist theatre artists. Naming an artistic coordinator, instead of an artistic director, helped to institutionalize the collective values they thought might be leached out of the company under the aegis of a board. However, had they been titled artistic directors, Nightwood's artistic coordinators may have been considered less as outsiders by their counterparts in other theatres and perhaps may have been given just a bit more legitimacy, especially among potential funders.

In order to nurture women who wanted to turn the act of imagining themselves as writ-

ers into the reality of becoming playwrights, Nightwood established its annual *Groundswell Festival* of new works by women. In its five years, the festival has offered over 50 women the opportunity to workshop scripts and present theatrical ideas in their formative phases. And it has offered the public a unique opportunity to get a glimpse of the future of feminist theatre.

However, it became obvious that Nightwood was never going to be able to be all things to all women. In 1986, Cynthia Grant left Nightwood to found the Company of Sirens. Since its inception, the Company of Sirens has remained true to its commitment to grassroots political theatre, mounting road shows on themes like women and work and violence against women in unusual venues—conference banquets, community health centres, many of them in small towns. The Sirens have also maintained an open-door policy for emerging theatre artists. Through their Soirées, unknown or new the-

atre performers and writers show original, unauditioned work.

Nightwood, in the meantime, had begun to produce the *Five Minute Feminist Cabaret*, the annual event of fast, funny feminist stage work celebrating International Women's Day. In many ways *FemCab* has become emblematic of Nightwood's internal philosophical tensions. Originated by Women's Cultural Building in 1983, it started out

as a quintessentially grassroots event, with an open call to anyone female with a feminist bent to submit ideas. Initially, auditions were not required and for its first two years, *FemCab* was held in bars—a relaxed and casual setting. When Nightwood took over the event as producer, the company began experimenting with mounting *FemCab* in legitimate theatre settings. *FemCab* supporters, proud of the roots of the event, chal-

## NIGHTWOOD PRODUCTIONS

- 1979 **The True Story of Ida Johnson** Adapted from the novel by Sharon Riis, created by Christa Van Daele, Cynthia Grant, Maureen White, Kim Renders and Mary Vingoe.
- 1980 **Glazed Tempers** Inspired by the work of Alex Colville, created by Cynthia Grant, Kim Renders, Maureen White and Peter Van Wart.
- 1981 **Flashbacks of Tomorrow/Memorias Del Mañana** Developed with the Latin American Community of Toronto, created by Cynthia Grant, Jim Dugan, Maureen White, Waldo Gonzalez, Kim Renders, Ken Williams, George Tabacznik, Elaine Tabacznik and Mary Durkan.
- The Yellow Wallpaper** Based on the short story by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, adapted by Mary Vingoe and Cynthia Grant.
- 1982 **Mass/Age** Collective production.
- Hooligans** Created by Mary Vingoe and Jan Kudelka.
- 1983 **Four Part Dischord** Performance piece by Mary Durkan, Cynthia Grant, Kim Renders and Maureen White.
- Psycho Nuclear Breakdown** One-woman show by Cynthia Grant.
- This Is For You, Anna** Written and performed by Suzanne Khuri, Ann-Marie MacDonald, Banuta Rubess and Maureen White.
- Smoke Damage: A Story of the Witch Hunts** Written by Banuta Rubess.
- Peace Banquet** Collective production loosely based on *Peace* by Antigone. Directed by Cynthia Grant.
- 1984 **Rhubarb** Festival of short work in progress, co-produced with Buddies in Bad Times Theatre.
- Temptonga** One-woman show by Ida Carnevali.
- Love and Work Enough** Collective production, based on the lives and stories of Ontario pioneer women.
- Pope Joan** By Banuta Rubess.
- 1986 **The Edge of the Earth Is Too Near**, Violette Leduc By Jovette Marchessault.
- 1987 **War Babies** By Margaret Hollingsworth.
- The Last Will and Testament of Lolita** By Louise Garfield, Banuta Rubess, Peggy Thompson and Maureen White.
- 1988 **Up Against the Wallpaper** By Kate Lushington (with the Clichettes).
- My Boyfriend's Back and There's Gonna Be Laundry** By Sandra Shamus.
- Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)** By Ann-Marie MacDonald.
- 1989 **The Paraskeva Principle** By Francine Volker.
- The Herring Gull's Egg** By Mary Vingoe.
- 1990 **Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots** By Monique Mojica.

lenged this turn of events. They believed that it would work against Nightwood's philosophy of encouraging new theatre artists.

In the meantime, the founding of the collectively-based Sirens may have given Nightwood the inspiration to concentrate less on collective work and more on developing individual writing talents. With less than 17 per cent of Canadian productions written by women (and even less directed by women), Nightwood could significantly alter the face of Canadian theatre by producing women's work. Productions of *The Herring Gull's Egg* by Mary Vingoe, *Up Against the Wallpaper* by Kate Lushington for the Clichettes and *War Babies* by Margaret Hollingsworth all firmed up Nightwood's growing reputation as a realizable support system for women playwrights within the theatre community.

But the 1988 success of *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* by Ann-Marie MacDonald gave Nightwood exposure to wider audiences. From the moment the spirited Shakespearean romp opened, it was obvious that it had to be seen by theatre-goers outside Toronto, and that it deserved a larger venue than its first run had given it. With the help of timely grants from the Canada Council, Nightwood began organizing a four-city tour of *Goodnight Desdemona*. Later that year, *Goodnight Desdemona* received the Chalmers Award for best play, setting the stage for Nightwood's first official navigation of the

sometimes perilous waters of the mainstream.

Now poised on the brink of a new era, Nightwood is balancing its political commitment to reach out to large numbers with the need to nurture radical voices. Last fall, the Nightwood board began to think about ways to make the feminist Nightwood theatre an anti-racist theatre as well. In keeping with its emerging anti-racist mandate, Nightwood recently presented *Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots* by Monique Mojica, co-produced with Theatre Passe Muraille. The play uses music and myth to explore the paradoxical role of Native and mixed blood women in the conquest of the Americas. But as many feminist collectives have discovered, fighting racism is a profoundly moving and difficult process. Supporting the writings of women of colour can be only part of a complex dynamic.

Nightwood can now claim longevity—not many small theatres can boast a lifetime that spans a full decade—but it definitely is not an institution. Many theatre artists call it a support group, but they couldn't really tell you all the women that are in it. But in spite of the elasticity of its definition and regardless of the fact that the company has never had a permanent theatre space, many women playwrights, directors and actors call Nightwood home. ■

Susan G. Cole is an author and journalist who is completing her first play in association with Nightwood Theatre.

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**TV in Trinidad**  
by Richard Fung

**Isaac Julien  
Interviewed**  
by Molly Shinhat



# Within & Without Reconstructing Regional Identity

by Sarah Murphy

*Film and Video from the Heart of the Heart of the Regions—a Country?*, an exhibition of Canadian video and film, played in Calgary from September 16 to October 8 at the Glenbow Museum. The curators (Leila Sujir and Vern Hume) viewed new work as well as archival material over the two years in which the exhibition was developed. The curatorial rationale, developed after extensive travel throughout Canada, arose from the needs of the regions and the artists working in them. This research led to the eight categories into which the exhibition was divided, each taking up an afternoon's viewing on four consecutive weekends. The categories concentrated on issues of difference and otherness, and of different ways of seeing similar material. Thus the issue of marginality arose—the possibility that Canada, that any territory, can be a country of fragments and borders, constantly crossed, constantly redefined, a place of many subjectivities, many places from which to speak.

The exhibition came under some criticism from certain

curators and critics for including film from that major institution and sometime ogre, the NFB. Yet, within the context of questions about identities and margins and otherness, it is interesting to note that the most profoundly moving film, for me, was Gil Cardinal's *Foster Child*—an NFB documentary. I am not sure I would have found it moving in the same way if it were shown just in an NFB context rather than a more open context where I could see it juxtaposed with Sara Diamond's *Keeping the Home Fires Burning*, with its self-conscious search for documentary/agit prop roots, and Judith Doyle's independent documentary film *Lac La Croix*, or Marusia Bociurkiw's *Night Visions*, with its political narrative improvisation that moves almost into the territory of a morality play. I think that the exhibition had a great influence on our understanding of Canada because of what it made of the local and the locality—the place from which we see, from which we form our community and inform those around us.

Photo courtesy NFB Canada.



**The following is a conversation with Leila Sujir, the exhibition's director as well as co-curator.**

**FUSE:** These days we often hear about the need to reclaim histories or roots in order to reclaim identities, in terms of, for example, gender, age, sexual preference and race, as well as place/locality. This came up quite often in works at the exhibition. Gil Cardinal's film, for example, while it resonates with problems common all over Canada, represents a situation that speaks in particular to the recent history of the West. *Foster Child*, a quest filmed directly as its events unfold, is a film of many epiphanies. When, after discovering his mother's unmarked Social Services grave Gil Cardinal places a headstone on it to end the film, it is as if he names his mother, again and for the first time. In that gesture he names a whole urban Native community into the public memory, a community of "hard Indians," as he had earlier described it with some distress, into existence, a community that I grew up among. I don't know if this film would have the same power over someone who was not

an essay in which he talks about Canada as a post-modern country, that suggests that Canada did not "exist" in modernist terms:

Canada is supremely a country of margins, beginning from the literal way in which almost every city borders on a wilderness. . . In a high modern world, with its privileged stories, Canada was invisible. . . The margin, the periphery, the edge, now, is the exciting and dangerous boundary where silence and sound meet. It is where the action is. In our darker moments we feel we must resist the blind and consuming power of the new places with their new or old ideas that now want to become centres. In our happier moments we delight in the energy of the local, in the abundance that is diversity and difference, in the variety and life that exist on any coastline of the human experience.

("Disunity as Unity: A Canadian Strategy," *The Lovely Treachery of Words: Essays Selected and New*).

**FUSE:** Are the margins just a source for the centre, as Canada or Western Canada are sources of raw materials for the States or Ontario, in this case for similar or exotic takes on what matters to the centre and having no inherent value of their own, or do they have a thinking centre, an otherness which can inform us all?

**Sujir:** There is a process of claiming which often takes place at the "centre" because they can claim more publicly, more loudly. It is that process which tends to work against the local. It allows the local resource to be stripmined yet again whether for raw materials, ideas, backdrops (as in tourism), handpower, brainpower, or artists, rather than another equal voice in the web voices. Interestingly, at such events as the 1987 Plains Conference in Winnipeg, a new way of looking at Canada as a country of margins and locales, interconnections and weblike matrices was already taking form.

**FUSE:** During the exhibition Quebec critic, Jean Tourangeau, noted that the strong curatorial rationale gave a regional overview of Canadian video and film. Has an active debate about the meaning of regional, and marginal, even about canon, been animated by this exhibition?

**Sujir:** We had to debate whether or not the notion of region was suspect as a way of decentring, and whether the notion of canon applies. Some curators have insisted that there hasn't been enough time to establish a canon. However, when we started our research, very few works, especially in video, on the Prairies were being exhibited or discussed. We really were regarded as the hinterland—the places where artists from the centre could show their work. All of that has changed tremendously over the last two and a half years.

When I first started producing in film and video (1972) and working in Alberta, there was a tremendous absence here—an absence of reference for me, as a developing media artist, to works in an experimental genre, works breaking the boundaries, exceeding the limits of genre. Moving out from Alberta, I noticed in exhibitions that through the works being shown and in the

**Still from *Foster Child* by Gil Cardinal.**

the child of a severely dislocated family brought up by a white mother and Native stepfather (my background) whose greatest childhood fear was "coming into care." Part of my own history was given back to me, out of a completely different experience, because in naming his mother, he named my stepfather, and renamed me, in a way I had never expected. And I don't think this could have happened in a less varied context. I'm not sure if it's the kind of film on race that would get much run in Toronto. How do you think this relates to the question of marginality?

**Sujir:** I suppose the whole issue of margins has to do with power. From the margins, one can observe that much more clearly than from the centre. The notion of other "others" is that sense in which the margin now is becoming the occupied territory from which to speak. There is a sense of the colonization of the marginal position. I think that is a dangerous politic, one which has nothing to do with making community or making meaning but which has everything to do with power, even, in some cases very limited power, over a small group of people. But power, nevertheless, rather than empowerment of the other. I'll quote here from Robert Kroetsch, an important Canadian writer, from



categories they did and did not represent again, there were habits (again a reference to canon) and the work from the Prairies was not part of that "habit." As Vern Hume says in his curatorial essay ("Along the Border: Voices from the Edge of the Frame" in programme notes for *Film and Video from the Heart of the Heart of the Regions*):

The project was conceived with the premise that what we choose to show as curators forms canons which makes some work visible and other work invisible. With the primary flow of information being historically one way, from the centre, the existing canons have been formed by a very small number of people working in and responding to their own locale. Although the decisions on what to represent are predicated on an apparently neutral concern for quality, the notion of quality is informed—defined—by the canon. Like the Saturday morning cartoon, canons are formed by the replication of a single way of looking (excluding), carrying embedded in them their own agendas. . . . The exhibition was intended not to conform to existing notions of "quality," and is, instead, based on difference and place. [It] is not an exhibition about regionalism; rather, it is an attempt to present work in the context of a new understanding of the region as a community of difference—a context which does not privilege a specific place, method of work, or genre. As such, the exhibition represents a positive step in creating a new dialogue about ourselves.

I also mention in my curatorial essay ("The Viewer as Traveller" in programme notes for *Film and Video from the Heart of the Heart of the Regions*) that we wanted to resist categories. In a sense, we "blurred genres," also the subject of a recent conference held at the University of Calgary in the Spring of '89.

**FUSE:** As I watched the exhibition what most struck me was its tremendous coherence, how each film or video seemed to inform an ongoing debate. I am curious as to how this was achieved out of such great diversity.

**Sujir:** One of the ways we created this coherence was through the eight programmes which were generated out of the first year of research. Vern Hume and I travelled to the various distribution and production centres across the country looking at new work as well as archival material. It was difficult to come up with the categories since the amount of Canadian production is, in a sense, as vast a territory as Canada. In addition, we wanted to acknowledge concerns stretching back as far as the last 20 years. I have commented in the programme notes that the exhibition is not a survey, but rather, it represents moments in an on-going history of Canadian video and film.

For me, the exhibition became a series of overlapping waves, overlapping concerns creating cross-currents, new ways of putting things together. In the case of the older tapes, social conditions have changed, in other cases not, both creating interesting points. For instance, the court cases involving child abuse in Newfoundland now are very public, and one scene in the film *Extraordinary Visitor* makes reference to those abuses. Audiences I sat with years ago, when the film first came out, did not notice those scenes or did not necessarily see them as part of

the reference the parody makes to the world we live in. But now, this audience here noticed. All of those cross-overs, connecting of concerns within the works, make the exhibition interactive, something for the viewer to take part in. The cross-overs take place within and across genres, within and across video and film production, within and across historical and contemporary work. Seeing those works together, the boundaries dissolve.

**FUSE:** Was the mix of old and new work a self-conscious method of canon making and canon breaking? Do you feel you are creating a new canon by inserting historical material into a different context, thus forming a new way of looking for and at more recent material? If so, how does this work given the constant search for newness that seems to view time-based work as having a shelf-life, if not a built-in obsolescence, much like many consumer products. Some people, for example, have said to me, "Oh, I've seen that work before. Why would you want to see it again?"

**Sujir:** The response, "I've seen this work before" or from curators/programmers, "I've shown this work before," may be legitimate in terms of one's time, what one chooses to do with one's time. I suppose what we're proposing in the project is revision as well as a single vision, single viewing. Canons tend to reproduce sameness—the works begin to engender other works like them. The strange thing about that is where we placed the sameness. In this instance, the sameness was in terms of subject or intent so that the differences were presented in another way. For this reason too, it was necessary to have longer viewing sessions—simply so as to be able to create those cross-overs.

**FUSE:** I have heard artists' video referred to, both favourably and unfavourably, as a series of open or not so very open letters between members of a fairly closed community. In opening this exhibition to film, as well as combining work from institutions along with non-institutional work, were you, as a video artist/filmmaker, attempting to have art video go public in a new way?

**Sujir:** Yes, definitely. I think the video community has often thought of going public through work that has focused on television format and so on, and through the development of festivals that show both video and film. And I suppose it links back to those habits where works often tend to get locked into a critical context after a first viewing. Another reason to go public is the absence of Canadian video and film within the territory of the public imagination. It is, I think, an important goal, which programmers and curators in this country have been responding to for a long time. Our exhibition was part of that on-going process of embedding the artists'/producers' work into a public context. ■

**Sarah Murphy is a Calgary-based writer and author of *Measure of Miranda* and *Comic Book Heroine*.**

# short fuse

## New vision

Toronto's Sister Vision Press has launched a quarterly newsletter. *ABENG* will feature book reviews, community news, works by new writers as well as Sister Vision writers, interviews and updates from women's organizations in "Third World countries." Subscriptions are \$15 (\$20 for institutions), contact Sister Vision Press P.O. Box 217, Station E Toronto, Ontario M6H 4E2.



## Song & Dance II

Armed with bottles, stones and posters exhorting people to "Gobble up the rich," more than 1,000 demonstrators battled with police outside the Vienna State Opera on February 22. Nine demonstrators and 60 police officers were injured. The protesters were demanding that the funds raised for the annual opera ball be used to finance social programmes for the poor and the homeless.

Princess Caroline of Monaco and former Nazi Kurt Waldheim, the President of Austria, were among the 7,000 guests who paid US \$183 to attend. While demonstrators clashed with police outside, scores of news photographers inside the opera fought among themselves for the best shot of the Princess. One photographer, it was reported, stepped on her gown. (AP)

## Unkindest cut

Finance Minister Michael Wilson's budget cuts to Native newspapers, broadcasting and lobby groups is widely seen as a cynical attempt by the Conservative government to silence dissent. The \$10 million cuts will affect a wide range of groups that were funded through the Secretary of State. The Assembly of First Nations, which represents 593 bands across the country, was stripped of its \$562,000 core funding. When the cuts were announced, Assembly spokesperson Ovide Mercredi said, "we are being penalized for being too effective in representing the interests of the Indian people." On February 26 George Erasmus, national chief of the Assembly, noting that bilingual programmes were left intact, charged that Michael Wilson's cuts were racially motivated. Other programmes affected by the cuts are:

- The Native Broadcast Access Program (budget \$2.2 million), which funds Native broadcasting in remote regions, was cut by 16 per cent.
- The Native Communications Program (budget \$3.4 million) funds 15 Native Language Newspapers across the country. This program was eliminated.
- The Friendship Centre Program which helps Natives in urban areas was cut by \$1.2 million.
- Funding for about 27 regional councils has been eliminated.
- Core funding for the Native Council of Canada has been eliminated.
- Seven provincial and territorial Native groups had their funding cut by 15 per cent. (The Toronto Star)

## ROM protest

Over a hundred members of Toronto's Black community rallied outside the Royal Ontario Museum on March 10 to protest "Into the Heart of Africa," an exhibit they say portrays Africans as "barbaric" and "primitive."

The exhibit consists of African artifacts collected by nineteenth century white Canadian explorers. (See "Royal Spoils," *FUSE* Vol. XIII No. 3)

The protestors, carrying placards that read Racist Ontario Museum, claimed the exhibit's explanatory material is racist because it presents a white colonialist view of Africa.

ROM public relations head Linda Thomas said, however, "The museum's position is that our exhibit is a historically based collection and it's historically correct."

Charles Roach, president of the Martinsday Committee and one of the protestors wrote a letter to the ROM complaining about the exhibit. But in a responding letter, the curator claimed the show was "balanced," Roach said. (The Varsity)



## Customarily stupid

Revenue Canada customs officials used the occasion of Freedom to Read Week in February to become censors, again. Customs officials seized a shipment of books bound for Toronto's Glad Day Books, which specializes in gay and lesbian literature. Over the years, customs officials have singled out Glad Day shipments, impounding books readily available at other mainstream bookstores. Among the books recently impounded was Jane Rule's *The Young In One Another's Arms*. (The Toronto Star)



## Silencing dissent

Deep cuts to the Secretary of State's women's programme announced in the federal budget are a deliberate attempt to silence disadvantaged groups, women's groups are saying. The cuts will be devastating to 80 women's centres across the country which lost all their \$1.4 million funding. The centres provide counselling and shelter for women who have been physically abused and advice on children and health. The poor, the uneducated and those who have been battered will be most affected. "These centres help women who couldn't get help anywhere else," said Ginette Busque, vice-president of the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women.

Also, funding for three women's publications, *Healthsharing*, *Resources for Feminist Research* and *Canadian Women's Studies*, totalling about \$200,000 was eliminated. Other groups affected are the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women, the Canadian Committee on Learning Opportunities for Women, the Women's Research Centre and Noveau Depart. Commenting on the cuts, Alice De Wolff, executive coordinator of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women, said "They are cutting our ability to talk to each other and with the public. They are affecting our ability to do research, to help women re-enter the work force, to provide counselling, child care and support." (The Toronto Star)



# talking b(1)ack

ayanna black speaks with **bell hooks**

Black theorist bell hooks was here. Yes. She was here in Toronto, last November, spreading, like a preacher, the new age of feminism. That is, Black feminism.

hooks's work is the most centred and humanitarian of all the feminist theorists. She is one of the most provocative and original thinkers of this decade. For me, she is like Simone de Beauvoir was in the early '70s, when *The Second Sex* was the bible for women wanting feminist consciousness. What makes hooks's work so powerful is her ability to transform existing dogma around issues concerning class, race and gender. Her work is not only intellectual exercise but consciously written for Black women, regardless of social class, and other people to comprehend.

As a critical thinker, hooks lectures and also writes a monthly column called "Sisters of the Yam" in *Zeta Magazine*, an alternative U.S. journal on politics and the arts. hooks's first book *Ain't I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism* was published in 1981 (South End Press). Her most recent book, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, was published in 1989 in Canada by Between The Lines. A new book, *Yearning*, will be published in the spring (Between the Lines). She has also published *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center* (South End Press). All of her books are testimonials to her life which, in turn, serve as food for the brain and spirit of Black women and other people who want this rejuvenating nourishment.

At the Euclid Theatre where she spoke, over 150 people of mixed race and cultures were unable to get in. She was overwhelmed and her voice echoed concern: "Exclusion is a very

sensitive issue for us Black people and it's not a very good feeling . . . For example, at the talk in Toronto many white people, I think, couldn't understand why Black people were upset that they couldn't get in. For many white people it was just another kind of event but, I think, there were Black women who came for food to nourish their spirits and to keep themselves going. I think a lot of Black women, in the end, are coming out because we are looking for answers to the crisis in our lives, some of the pain we are feeling in our communities and our gender relationships."

**I spoke with hooks at her home in Boston in December, shortly after her speaking engagements in Toronto.**

**FUSE: The feminist movement evolved from white middle class women. In the feminist movement, do you feel that Black women and other women of colour see themselves as priorities; do white women see people of colour as partners?**

**hooks:** I think that white women don't see us as equal partners in the movement and I think, especially, privileged white women don't see even lower class white women as partners. I think the fact is they see themselves as leading the movement. And that's been one of the big problems. We are constantly engaged in power struggles and I think that one of the reasons is that a lot of these white women question sexist hierarchy, but they don't really question class and race hierarchy. I don't think that white women can begin to address other people until they deal with

the politics of racism and white supremacy as well as class elitism. But, I feel it's crucial for Black women and people of colour to shift our attention away from a response to white women's conceptualization of feminism, and to begin to conceptualize a feminist movement that takes into account our particular struggles.

**FUSE: How can Black women develop that particular concept or ideology of feminism?**

**hooks:** I think Black women can develop it by really examining the way sexism operates in our lives, in our domestic relationships, in parenting, and looking at the ways institutionalized sexism affects us—as in the poverty of Black women. How can it be that many Black women are losing economic ground in the States? If you think, for example: 20 years ago when all these corporations weren't making Black hair products, frequently poor Black women were able to set up hairdressing parlours in their homes, on their kitchen tables, and make extra money, which they used to empower themselves and their families. And increasingly as that kind of economic base is taken out of Black communities and put into the hands of white corporations, Black women really suffer. We have to look at the gendered aspects of our oppression, and begin to develop feminist theory that addresses our concerns, as well as looking at how feminism impacts on Black liberation struggles.

**FUSE: Do you think feminism or developing a Black feminist theory is important to Black women?**

**hooks:** I think, globally, Black women are beginning to recognize the value of critiquing sexism in our lives. I don't think that necessarily correlates with an equal commitment to participate in the development of theory. I think that it's very important for us

to nurture and cultivate young Black women who are students and who are struggling to develop themselves intellectually, to think in terms of feminist theory. One of the things that white women have been able to do very effectively in institutionalized Women's Studies programmes is produce scholars who will in fact be the new generation of thinkers, exploring issues of gender. And if we look at the women majoring in Women's Studies programmes in the U.S., we find very few Black women or women of colour. So, in that sense, we are not yet fully creating the base for these young women of colour to develop their intellectual directions in ways that will focus on gendered scholarship.

**FUSE: Do you think Black women and other people of colour are afraid of the word "feminist?" And if so, do you think it's necessary for us to create a new word, for example, like Alice Walker's term "womanist?"**

**hooks:** The problem I have with "womanist," which I have articulated in my work, is the way it's so divorced from a

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bell hooks



political tradition and the sense of a political movement. I find that "womanist" has a way of personalizing and individualizing what I think has to be a collective struggle. Rather than, as Black women want to, throw off the term "feminism" because they often see it as associated with white people, I think we have to reclaim the term and re-work it so that it speaks directly to our lives.

**FUSE:** Any ideas as to how this can be done?

**hooks:** Well, I think that the first way that it's done is that we really look at how we define feminism. One of the definitions I keep trying to suggest to people is that if we define feminism as a movement to end sexism and sexist oppression—that's a very simple kind of definition—it doesn't privilege white women. Such a definition doesn't say women are the good guys or men are the bad guys. It basically says feminism does have a political agenda, that is, irradicating sexism, which means that each of us can then analyze how we play in achieving that political agenda. And therefore developing a feminist struggle out of the locations where we are. Black women looking at that political agenda might say, "I want to start with the institutions in my life—the church, or what have you—that are important to me."

**FUSE:** Do you think Black women associate feminism with lesbianism, and respond on the basis of homophobia?

**hooks:** I think one of the things that we have to see, while I think that the struggle for gay rights and sexual practice are central to feminist struggle, is that people understand that feminism and lesbianism are not one and the same thing. (Though certainly Alice Walker's and others' evocation, "womanist," leaves room for that type of analysis.) And rather than accepting that construct as a legitimate reason to reject feminism, I think we have to want to question that homophobia and talk about what can Black people gain from being homophobic. I don't think we gain anything. I think in fact we cut ourselves off from the many gay Black people who have something to offer our lives.

**FUSE:** In *Talking Back* you said, "To create a liberated voice, one must confront the issue of audience." Do you think a writer should calculate an audience?

**hooks:** I think that most writers in fact do envision potential readers for the work that they are doing. And that is not something that, I think, robs us of an imaginative critical process because none of us talks into a void. We talk with some idea of a potential listener. And I don't think that it means that we totally conceptualize in a clear way who the listener is going to be. But I certainly think about the people I want to address when I write. I keep saying to people when you finally get a truly diverse audience as that audience [at the talk in Toronto] was that evening, then suddenly you can no longer use just one language

code and assume that everyone is going to understand your talk. I'm sure there were a lot of people at that talk who are not readers of theory at all. So then, how do you talk to them in a way that embraces them and shows that you want your words to be heard by them, unless you are able to have multiple languages, multiple paradigms for speaking. I think one of the problems we encounter when dealing with white people who are obsessed with theory is that a lot of us, as Black folks, have had to grow up in a context of multiple languages where we can go back and forth from standard English to patois—whether it's Caribbean or the Black English of the United States, or the underclass or what have you. And I think that what I often find in classes is that white students are somehow uncomfortable with any kind of language shift that they don't understand because they may not necessarily have those multiple language skills.

**FUSE:** Do you think that white people see this language shift as losing power?

**hooks:** Oh, absolutely. I think there were moments in my talk in Toronto where all white listeners did not necessarily understand what was being said because much of my talk was directed towards the many Black people and people of colour that were there. When I was first teaching at Yale, the white male students would complain all the time because they felt something was different about my class. They didn't feel at the centre because, in fact, I wasn't speaking to their experience as a universal experience.

**FUSE:** In *Talking Back* you also said, "Solidarity is not the same as support. To experience solidarity we must have a community of interest." Can you comment?

**hooks:** Well, I think, to stay within the frame that we're talking in, let's say a white person would say at any of the talks that I gave in Toronto, at the Euclid or at Osgoode, "There were times that I didn't understand what she was saying. She seemed to be

## How do you talk to people unless you have multiple languages, multiple paradigms for speaking

just talking to Black people." It seems to me that if that white person has already identified themselves with the oppressed and struggled with us, they would understand the necessity sometimes of just talking to Black people. And that to me would be a gesture of solidarity. Unlike the person who might think "Well, I supported this event, I came out to it, this person should have been talking to me as well." Solidarity takes us beyond support because you can support something without really understanding it or being transformed by it. If you really want to be in solidarity with people, then you've got to go farther than standing on the outside. You've got to find a way of being on the inside of that struggle and that is very difficult.

**FUSE:** The concept of love is a continuous thread throughout your books. Can you explain?

**hooks:** One of the things that happens is that, in a lot of radical circles in the U.S., people don't want to see love as part of the politicizing process. One of the things that I like so much about the work of Paolo Freire is his early work; he talks about the revolution and the revolutionaries as needing to be people capable of love. What we've seen is people who are motivated by self-interest and self-greed. As we look at various Black power movements and see where they most failed were in those instances when leaders were motivated by their own egos and their struggles for power, rather than by their concern for the collective good. One of the things that makes Malcolm X such a heroic figure is that we sense in him that quality of love and commitment to serve Black people. It is really crucial to the de-colonizing process.

**FUSE:** As women brace for the 1990s are they bracing for a backlash against the feminist movement?

**hooks:** I don't agree with this whole evocation of backlash. Anti-feminism has always been strong. It's become more visible now because those of us who are in resistance, in feminist resistance, have become stronger. So in some way anti-feminism responds to the growing power. Think about how many Black men were at the talk. Five years ago Black men, in general, weren't coming out to feminist talks. It says that feminism is beginning to have an impact. That is, therefore, threatening.

**FUSE:** Do you think that this impact has any bearing in that your work does embrace men?

**hooks:** That's part of the development of feminist theory. We can look back on the early stages and say that the separatism that was so strong was particularly coming out of the privileged location from which people constructed theory. If you can go and live in your own privatized apartment then you can maybe talk about a conceptualized movement where women do not have to interact with men. But if your life is about living, it's

## If that white person has already identified themselves with the oppressed and struggled with us, they would understand

about living within a community where you may have to share housing and work space continually with men, as it is so often with people of colour. Then we have to learn how to work with men.

**FUSE:** Are you saying, then, that involving and embracing men in the feminist movement does not necessarily mean women giving up their power?

**hooks:** Absolutely not. In the same way that I don't think I would talk about white people leading the Black liberation struggle, I don't see men as the leaders of a feminist movement but I see them as having a tremendous role to play in the transformation of consciousness around sexism.

**FUSE:** Taking another quote from *Talking Back*, you said, "Problems arise not when white women choose to write about the experiences of non-white people but when such material is presented as authoritative." What about writings that are racist and stereotyping?

**hooks:** Hopefully when people are committed in solidarity they will interrogate their own writings. All of us have to engage in constant critique of our writings that reproduce the old oppressive paradigms. And that means white people and people of colour who are aware.

**FUSE:** What about the "progressive/politically-correct" person who is aware yet they project a stereotyping image?

**hooks:** Our own response can be to critically interrogate that work and to show where it falls short. For example, my piece on *Do The Right Thing* was a piece of critical interrogation that was saying this work of art is important, it's valuable, but it also has some limitations. One of the things that was disturbing, was that



we did not get any kind of diverse images of Black masculinity in that film. We really got a lot of new taste on old stereotypes. It's important for us to look at the limitations, which is not about discrediting or putting down the work but saying let's look at it critically.

**FUSE:** Euzhan Palcy, director of *A Dry White Season*, has affirmed that the film was made consciously for a white audience. What are your feelings about making a film strictly for this market?

**hooks:** I find this very problematic because it seems to me that we need to recognize that Black people, globally, need to have awareness of the struggles in South Africa and of our complicity. Those of us who are U.S. citizens need to know that we are complicitous in upholding and maintaining the structures of apartheid so that we can engage in resistance struggles here. When someone makes that kind of statement, it suggests that only white people need their consciousness raised. I thought the film was very important, perhaps it would have been more complex if she had said, "I want Black and white audiences moved by this film."

**FUSE:** Contemporary Black Jazz musicians have said that if it hadn't been for white people there would not have been an audience for Jazz. What are your feelings about this?

**hooks:** To me that comment is misguided. We have to recognize that this kind of white audience is more of a contemporary phenomenon so that I don't think one can see it in terms of "we couldn't produce the art if there was no white audience." History has already shown us that is not the case. There have always been Black art forms, even when there was the kind of segregation that meant we could not rely on white audiences. The issue is that Black artists have only recently begun to think about making a living through their writing or playing music. In that sense, of course, if we want to start to talk about art that allows one to be economically self-sufficient, we are talking about an art that necessarily has to speak to the Black people who are most monied. Certainly there is a need for Black people to become engaged in the economic support of writers, etc. But we fall into a trap if we want to argue then, in the same way, that our creativity exists because of white patronage. I think that is erroneous. The extent to which we are able to survive economically and create is clearly tied up with white patronage. But those are two very separate things. What we also know is that there are many Black artists who have lost artistic power because of their tendency to create products that are specifically oriented to attract white patronage.

**FUSE:** What about Zora Neale Hurston who, in the '30s, created work that was very Black oriented?

**hooks:** What happened to her is that white people at one point were very interested in a certain kind of production of Black expression and paid for it because it was a part of fadism. When that went away, because she had not constructed her own vision of self-determination—that is to say, "How will I survive without white patronage?"—I think she began to think. Do you think white people are going to maintain this fascination with ethnic fashion and all that ethnic stuff? What we see is, within a commodity culture right now, these things are the new commodity.

**FUSE:** You must have heard about the recent massacre of women in Montreal. What are your feelings about this kind of violence?

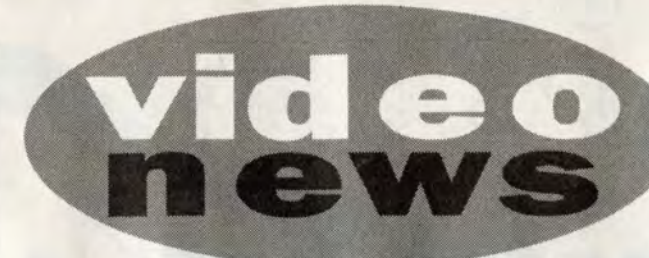
**hooks:** One of the things that is always disturbing about this kind of incident is that it allows people to imagine, to feel that this incident is somehow special. In fact violence against women is taking place everyday in this way. And the fact that the killer used the term "feminist" makes this violence suddenly being represented in the media as unique or different. I don't think it's unique and different. I think it's important for people to keep a real perspective on this—not as some violent feminist/anti-feminist backlash but as part of the continuum of male violence against women. One of the things that we see already happening in places in Canada is a kind of specificity within the educational institution as a kind of identification with those women. Ordinarily, privileged white folks and other people, when they read that a group of women have been hurt or massacred, don't identify at all with these women. They don't feel that this could have happened to them when in fact we should be feeling like that about all the cases about violence against women. About Sophia Cook [a young Toronto Black woman recently paralyzed after a police shooting], a lot of white folks and white women didn't even respond to the shooting. The massacre in Montreal has been on the front pages of all the U.S. newspapers. Again, we have to always critique the obsession in our culture with spectacle and with sensationalism.

**FUSE:** With this recent massacre, do you think white feminist women will rethink their position about violence and be able to be more supportive of Black women and people of colour?

**hooks:** No. I don't see that happening at all. In fact, it may have just the opposite impact. A lot of white women are feeling again that somehow their struggle, in terms of sexism, is a more privileged struggle than other forms of struggle.

bell hooks will be returning to Toronto early next fall to speak on *Yearning*. ■

Ayanna Black is a Toronto poet.



by Kim Tomczak

Canada Council Explorations Programme recently appointed Leutin Rojas to the position of Ontario officer. Video producers may find some productions fall within the criteria of the Explorations Section. The next grant deadline is Sept 15, 1990. Contact: Explorations, The Canada Council, P.O. Box 1047, Ottawa, Ontario K1P 5V8.

In an earlier column I mentioned that funding for video production is available from the Department of Supply and Services. I should also mention that there is another programme that might be of interest to video makers. The Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) has an audio visual co-production programme. For more information write to: Film and Video Group, Canadian Government Expositions and Audio Visual Centre, Supply and Services Canada, 440 Coventry Road, Ottawa, Ontario, K1A 0T1.

The *AIDS CABLE SHOW* is looking for production proposals for use on a brand new half-hour weekly programme to be aired on Rogers Cable 10 in Toronto. Each programme will examine a different aspect of the AIDS crisis. For more information contact Michael Balser (416) 360-7020 or John Greyson (416) 593-1376, or write to them c/o Trinity Square Video, 172 John Street, 4th Floor, Toronto, Ontario M5T 1X5.

EMMedia in Calgary has hired Ian Reid to the position of

Administrative Manager. Mr Reid, formerly the Executive Director of the Yorkton Film and Video Festival, will replace the irrepressible Grant Poier. Mr. Poier was responsible for a three-day brainstorming session in Halifax last summer for representatives from the Canadian video centres.

The entry deadline for the San Francisco International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival, also known as *Frameline*, is May 1, 1990. For entry forms and further information write:

*Frameline*, P.O. Box 14792, San Francisco, California, U.S.A., 94114, (415) 861-5245.

The American Film Institute Festival entry deadline is June 6, 1990. This is one of the best American festivals I know of with important audiences attending each year. For more information write to the American Film Institute, Ken Kirby, Box 1739, Hollywood, California, 90078.

The Independent Film and Video Alliance will be celebrating its 10th anniversary in Toronto at its annual general meeting. Meetings will be held from May 16-20, 1990 on the campus of the University of Toronto. Workshops and an exhibition of film and video from the member organizations will append the meeting. Contact: Martine Sauvageau, IFVA, 397, boul. St. Joseph O. #1, Montreal, Quebec H2V 2P1.

*Images 90*, Canada's most important festival of independent film and video, runs from June 7-12 at the Euclid Theatre in Toronto. *Images 90* will feature a survey show of films from the Newfoundland Independent Film Co-op and videotapes from Vancouver's Sara Diamond. In total there will be 16 programmes of film and video. Plan to attend.

Contact: David Clarkson, *Images 90*, 67 A Portland Ave, Toronto, Ontario M5V 2M9 (416) 971-8405.

Still from  
*Keeping the  
Home Fires  
Burning* by  
Sara Diamond.

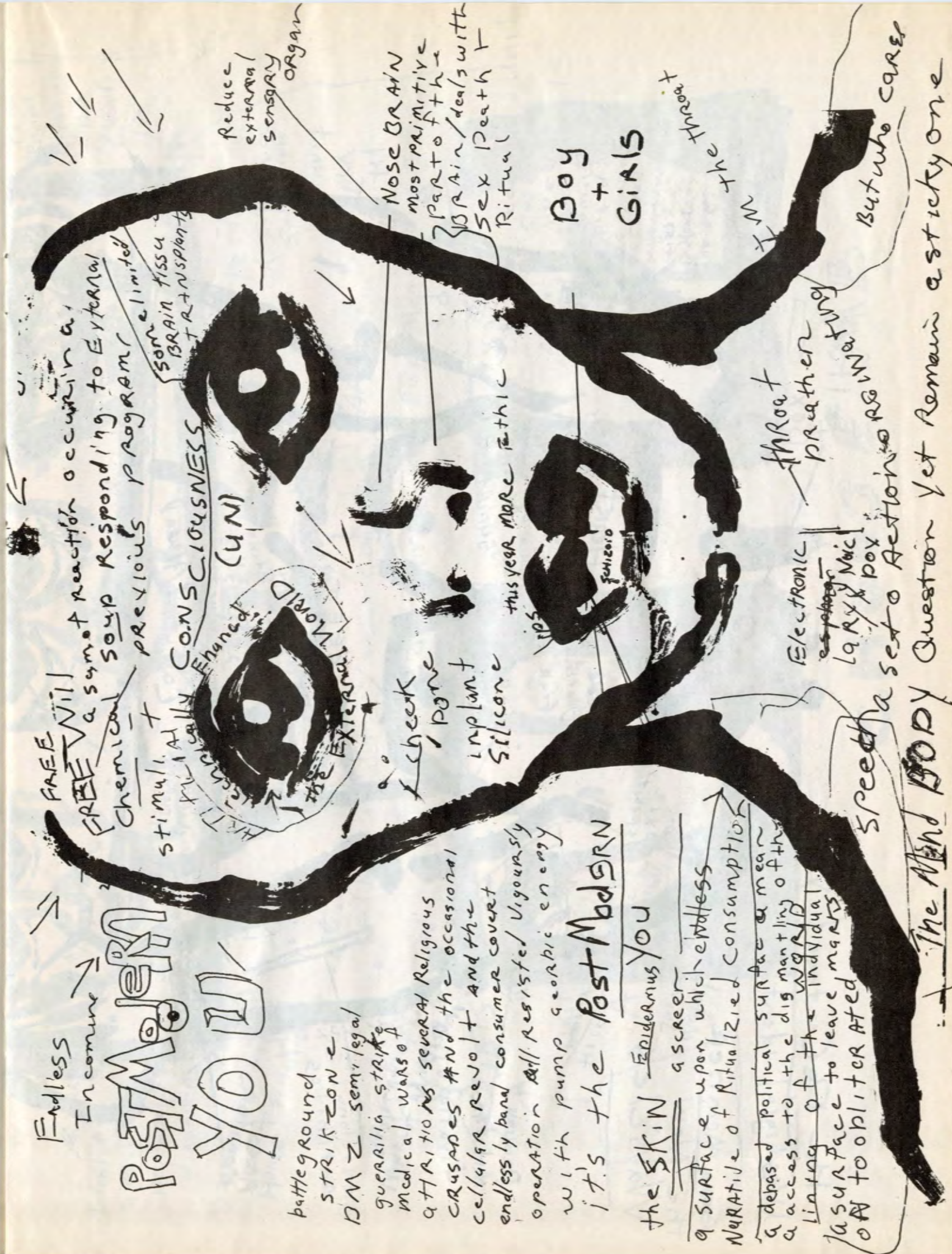


Still courtesy V tape.



Prof.  
by John Scott

# the troubled topography of the postmodern body





the DeCentered You  
(Vestigial Identity Parasite)

Gang Member  
the New Metal Joint  
Wavicles

Previous  
Military  
fixation

White Mammal  
replacem<sup>ent</sup> active

House  
Arrestor  
Monitor

PARASITE

toxic  
parasit

Heart Void  
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or symbolic gap  
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Image of 14th century  
Sump pump

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Sexual  
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disorder

Sick and tired  
of the simulacrum

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Interactive  
feed back unit

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↑ ↓ mini computer / Artificial Synapse

Fill in your own CRYOGENICAL frozen for later use

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CHOOSES ME





# INTERVIEW WITH



Still from Jeneva Shaw's *Native Daughter*.

## FILM & VIDEO

### Visible Difference

**IN VISIBLE COLOURS**  
INTERNATIONAL FILM AND VIDEO SYMPOSIUM  
Vancouver, B.C.  
Nov. 15 - 19, 1989

by Shani Mootoo

This past November *In Visible Colours*, the film and video festival and symposium, brought together an impressive concentration of vibrant, intense and far-sighted women of colour.

Festival coordinators Zainub Verjee of Women In Focus and Lorraine Chan of the National Film Board, Pacific Region sought to "address the significant lack of attention directed to the cinema of women of colour and Third World women."

The end result went beyond celebration and far beyond a mere showcasing of

works. Along with the film and video screenings were panels and workshops, and one day devoted to bringing the festival into the classroom through workshops for high school students. With the latter initiative, organizers touched on an area where the most meaningful advances can be made in terms of how we view and portray women of colour, Third World countries and other cultures.

The workshops brought to light many of the harsh realities of working in the film medium, which has traditionally been





Still from *Two Lies* by Pam Tom.

dominated by men. Film requires substantial financial support from investors, sources that are generally reluctant to fund women, in particular, women of colour and Third World women.

The event was an eye opener for people who, like myself, love being transported to other worlds and other lives through film and video but never stop to consider how the industry works: who controls the distribution of film and video? How does one avoid the grasp of the Hollywood monopoly? After viewing the works at the festival, I became acutely aware of how the public really needs to be exposed to the sensibilities of these women in order to counter the stereotyped images presented by the dominant cinema. The workshops on production and distribution co-ops that were held during the festival examined this issue and pointed out ways women of colour working in film and video can increase their audiences, bypass commercial enterprises and establish their own channels for distribution.

With the emergence of this restless and demanding breed of film and video makers comes a need for a new language of cinema. In a workshop called "Creating A New Aesthetics," Tracy Moffat (Australia), Fumiko Kiyooka (Canada), Zeinabu Irene Davis (U.S.A.) and moderator Loretta Todd examined the

need for women of colour to draw on their own cultural experiences, and to create their own aesthetics. The workshops gave the impression that a quiet revolution has begun—one that demands that women, women of colour and Third World women define themselves and their cultures through *their* works, putting to rest notions of the exotic, the erotic, primitiveness, naivety, subservience and servility.

While some of the ideas addressed in the workshops and panels were underdeveloped, they provided, nevertheless, a springboard for rebellion through the making of films and videos that are not only forms of art, but also information. Most importantly, perhaps, they provided the seeds for a rebellion against being defined by, and in the language of, the dominant culture.

Bringing together people from all over the world, *In Visible Colours* spawned a feeling of empowerment and camaraderie—there was a unity of purpose among the participants, who are dedicated to representing themselves. Nova Scotian Sylvia Hamilton (*Black Mother, Black Daughter*) expressed the sentiment at a press conference, "this feels like home."

Technical and scheduling problems were at times very apparent. Also, the publicity, which suffered because of near-sighted advertisers, could have been much better. But these are common growing

pains that will be overcome with time and experience, and in the final analysis, they did not hinder the overall success of *In Visible Colours*.

Generally the content of the films and videos was strong. Issues close to the hearts of women were presented in the context of their cultures and societies. Even though there were not a lot of cinematic skills to be shown off, the films did not suffer, and one message in particular was clear: with the increasing accessibility of video technology, video is no longer the exclusive domain of a select few. With distribution and production co-ops, accessible technology and the will to consciousness raising, it is clear that a new dawn is being heralded for women of colour in Vancouver and in Canada as a whole. ■

Shani Mootoo is a Vancouver-based artist and writer. *This Is Our Little Secret* is her upcoming book of paintings and poems.

## WOMEN'S STORY

PENG XIAOLIAN

90 min., 1987

by Jin-me A. Yoon

Let me tell you a story. In small Korean village, a little girl is howling, choking on her snot, her indignation. Her small face is red and swollen with the many tears from those tiny eyes. "My mother is a 'pabo,' she can't even bring a boy, some happiness into our lives." Her mother is a "pabo," "stupid," a "fool," an "idiot"; she blames her mother for her inadequacy and yet already she intimately identifies with her mother's shame. She is four years old. Twenty-five years later, I watch this tale of how women's lives are only valued in relation to male power in rural China.

*Women's Story*, by the Chinese filmmaker Peng Xiaolian, is a compelling account of three rural women's lives as they are propelled into an examination

of their oppressed condition in a male-dominated society. Visually, and in terms of its narrative structure, *Women's Story* is typical of the conventions of much mainstream Northeast Asian cinema. However, the conventional cinematic style is utilized effectively to investigate and intervene within a patriarchal culture, which traditionally depicts women as passive objects of the male gaze. While they are articulated by their social positioning within patriarchy, the three central characters, all women, manage to maintain their individual personalities. In this manner, the film neither valorizes the women nor depicts them as being purely victimized by the constraints of their social circumstances.

*Women's Story* opens with a woman wailing in distress. Her name is Jing, her fate is that she is being coerced into an "exchange marriage" to a mute man. In China, those who cannot afford to buy a wife, such as Jing's brother, must exchange a sister in order to acquire a bride. Jing is being dressed for this special occasion by her mother, who pressures her by asking whether she "wants the family lineage to stop." It is the familiar story of a woman having to comply with the exchange of women so prevalent in male-dominated society. Once again a woman asks another woman to sacrifice herself for the continuation of the patrilineal system. Women have such influence on one another's lives and without this complicitous persuasion it would be impossible to sustain the current imbalance of power. While she is being dressed, her brother can be seen in the background smashing dishes to express his disapproval of her "selfishness." Shortly after the marriage ceremony, she runs away from her husband and her matrimonial obligations. Although she knows her brother's marriage will be ruined, she states that she is justified because nobody cared for her well-being.

The incident reminds me of my grandmother's arranged marriage. At the age of 16, she was sent to live with my

grandfather's family. She was expected to rise before dawn to prepare meals for her brothers-in-law and to ensure that the extended household would run as if by magic—the invisibility of women's work. She stayed up night after night to mend the clothes, finish the chores, to prepare for yet another day. She did as she was expected to do, all the while demonstrating her saintly deference and humble piety. For was not a woman's happiness directly reflected in the happiness of others? As was customary, she was scolded and degraded by her mother-in-law, for this was the only exercise of direct power that a woman had in such a society.

Feng is the second central character in the film. She is humiliated because there are only female children in the family. Her father has died leaving them destitute and, as the eldest, she must leave the village to support the family. Feng's mother is heckled by a disrespectful neighbour, who brags, "with four sons I can say what I want." Without a son, Feng's family has been marked by social insignificance.

My father was the only son of six daughters. He had a younger brother, but in those days, the infant mortality rate was high in rural Korea and his younger brother died at three months of smallpox.

Needless to say, he was the only one educated in the West and encouraged to pursue a public persona via a professional career. Although from a privileged background, all my aunts derive their primary source of satisfaction through domesticity.

The third woman appearing in the film is simply known as "Lai's mother." Inscribed by her maternal function, she is subsumed by the relational significance of "mother" to her young son. Her joy and her pride are completely invested in Lai and her motivation for leaving the village is to make a better life for her son.

Before my brother was born, my mother and indeed my father were known as "Jin-me's mother" and "Jin-me's father." Even though two sisters were born after me, my parents' identities were defined by my familial position as the eldest... that is, until my brother was born. Then immediately, they were referred to as "Suk-hoon's mother" and "Suk-hoon's father." I wonder if I accepted this as "natural" or whether I felt indignant at being usurped by this little male creature?

Propelled by their needs, which are principally articulated by their respective social relations to men, the three women from rural Chongqing depicted in the



Still from Peng Xiaolian's *Women's Story*.





Still from Peng Xiaolian's *Women's Story*.

film set off to the city to sell wool. They encounter scorn by city dwellers for their peasant ways and they feel bewildered by the urban experience. Here, girls wear skirts and "paint" their faces. There is the novelty of escalators, the towering impressiveness of domino-like apartment buildings, the snake-like subway, the young fashionable woman in jeans framed by an expensive shop window. Life is "like a dream" until Lai's naive mother is cheated by a man who slyly hands her blank bills for her wool. Again, the sound of a woman's wailing. Do women weep in such a convincing manner in Western cinema? It is not sobbing, it is abandoned wailing from sheer lack of control over one's life, a cry from the belly.

With the help of other women who buy some wool so that they may try their luck in a smaller city nearby, the three women journey by train, a little more worldly and a lot more weary. On the train, they meet a pregnant peasant woman who is briskly forced off by the conductor who tells her, "This is not the Cultural Revolution; you cannot ride the trains for free." Feng, with little resources of her own, offers some money to the pregnant woman. The woman has fled her village in hope of giving birth to a boy who will earn her respect and self-worth in a soci-

ety where a rural woman has little means of improving her social status. She already has two girls and thus she is defying the government's birth control policy. (In an attempt to alleviate China's overwhelming population problem, the Chinese government imposes a one child quota for city dwellers and a two-child quota for rural areas.) The three women encounter the woman again after she has given birth to a boy. She is ecstatic to the point of complete obsessional absorption with her little "phallus"—her only means of societal power.

The film, made in 1987, was banned by the Chinese government primarily because it portrayed defiance of the government's birth control policy. That the character has to flee is tantamount to stating that had she remained in the village, she would have been heavily persuaded, if not coerced, into terminating her pregnancy. Chinese government censors gave Peng a "choice" of sorts. She could cut the scenes with the pregnant woman (compromising the integrity of the film) and have her film distributed, or she could leave the scenes in and have the film banned. Peng chose the latter.

The three women encounter more bad luck and hardship. In a moving scene, they cry in the rain after their wool has

been ruined. It's a collective expression of their continual discouragement. Throughout their various experiences, they discover many differences and conflicts among themselves. The two younger women, Jing and Feng, feel the desire to lead their own lives without the oppressive burden of patriarchy. By contrast, Lai's mother dreams of her son's bright future and refers to him as her "shining star." When Feng chooses to spend a night with a construction worker in the city, she is severely criticized by Lai's mother for her "shameful" actions. More wailing from the belly. Feng expresses her disgust with the hypocrisy of a world that denies her any pleasure. Did not the villagers spit on her mother and her sisters as they went to bury their father? Did they not accuse them of being evil women who actually caused the poor man's death? "Shame?" she asks, "What is shame in the face of such degradation?" Feng's assertion of her sexuality and independence is a transgressive gesture in a society that views a woman's virtue as a matter of familial propriety and possession.

Transformed by their exposure to such diverse experiences in the city, the three women return to the village with a strengthened conviction in their friendship. They have new confidence in their worldly ability to survive and have gained respect among the villagers with their financial success. There is much good-natured boasting about exotic material goods, city fashion and hairstyles until there is an interruption by dramatic drum rolls. In the last scene Jing's husband, with rope and stick in hand, comes to reclaim his disobedient wife. He is, of course, accompanied by another man. Jing and Feng link arms and proceed to walk towards the men in a confrontational manner. Feng says to Jing, "There is nothing to be afraid of, we are with you." The camera moves from their triumphant, exuberant faces, up to the open sky alluding to the improvement of women's lives in the rural China of the future.

*Women's Story* is inextricably interwoven with the all too familiar stories of the subjugation of Northeast Asian women. Although the conditions for urban women have significantly improved since the Chinese revolution, most rural women continue to suffer from the most basic forms of gender oppression. Some Western viewers may perceive the ending as a naive closure to the traditional narrative structure. However, in a culture where story telling is not relegated to the category of "fiction," *Women's Story* speaks of a desire to open up the possibilities for socio-political change. Thus, the expanse of sky at the end of the film seems to be a symbol of optimism that is necessary in the face of such daunting patriarchal structures. ■

Jin-me A. Yoon is a Korean-Canadian artist based in Vancouver.

## A LOVER AND A KILLER OF COLOUR

WANJIRU KINYANJUI  
9 min., 1988

by Louie Ettling and Camie Kim

A lover and a killer of colour I am,  
a painter.

I mix colours into a thick mass and  
slash with my brush across white canvas  
destroying  
pinks and browns yellows and reds  
To ease the monotony of canvasses

Footsteps echo on pavement as a woman walks through the streets of Berlin at night, leaving behind at an art exhibition a lover who pretends "not to know" her. One can hardly see the woman as she walks towards, and with, the camera. Muted colours and the indistinct lights of the city render her outline barely visible. A woman speaks slowly and deliberately. The words are from "The Exhibition," a poem written by director Wanjiru Kinyanjui a few years before she made *A Lover and Killer of Colour*.



Still from *A Lover and Killer of Colour* by Wanjiru Kinyanjui.

Hurrying, embarrassed, towards Shakespeareplatz  
Away, to save my face, only?  
Away, half walking, half running,  
unsteady, wobbling with wine.

In a world which only exhibits the art and ideas of white men, the woman walks past Shakespeareplatz, towards the Deutsche Oper subway stop and, finally, into the underground. After emerging from this "underground" the woman is shown in a room, among African carvings and her own paintings, leafing through an expensive art book whose pages and pages of European art history exoticize and eroticize women of colour.

Remember how juicy you found my black  
plump bottom?  
How sweet my kinky hair  
And it was so good you kept coming  
for more, more, until I was drained.

The balance of Kinyanjui's nine-minute film alternates between scenes where the woman sits or stands in a room, or writes and paints. When she paints, her movements are slow and deliberate. The resulting painting is large and colourful, one that both demands and receives attention. Such contrasts and tensions are sustained throughout the film. The anger and frustration expressed in the reading of the poem, for instance, occurs during scenes with little or no action or activity. Kinyanjui's camera provides a steady eye-level view, panning slowly or not at all.

If you don't stop calling me  
names you leeches  
I'll kill you on my white canvas,  
or in this poem  
Or in another.  
Why not? why not in this poem?

Still courtesy Wanjiru Kinyanjui.



A great deal of the film's impact lies in the apparent simplicity with which it portrays complex emotions and ideas.

Kinyanjui has recorded her poem about a poet and a painter visually, as well as aurally. This poet/painter—a woman of colour—examines the ways in which her identity has been oppressed and distorted through art and by her lovers. As viewers, we become silent witnesses to this process. The voice belongs to Kinyanjui and the woman depicted in her film.

The honesty of *A Lover and Killer of Colour* demonstrates the reasons for mounting a festival like *In Visible Colours*. Densely textured and richly sensual, *A Lover and Killer of Colour* creates colour both visually and philosophically and kills invisibility. At the same time, by rejecting and replacing dominant, simplistic, or false definitions of sexuality, art and culture, it reclaims the power of women of colour to name and define their lives.

When Kinyanjui spoke at the festival, she talked about how audiences in Berlin reacted to her film. "Certain people get really upset. Like this man who had made a film about a sexual fantasy involving a Turkish cleaning woman. Another man said that I was so uncompromising." She laughs, "when I wrote the poem I was angry. When I made the film I wasn't. But it's still too angry for some. Black communities, on the other hand, have really liked the film, have laughed out loud because they identified so strongly with parts of it. They sometimes refer to it as 'that killer film of yours.' My film, even though it was a student production, and a first one at that, challenges."

The woman stands up and opens her window. It is still night but the room is well-lit. The woman's presence is distinct and demanding. Her back is to the camera.

A black painter, a lover and destroyer of colours  
I am  
I mix them all. I kill them all.  
I slash with my brush across the empty white canvas.  
Knifing with my pen.

Editor's note: Due to a technical oversight *A Lover and Killer of Colour* could not be screened as scheduled. It was shown later at the Emily Carr College of Art and Design. ■

**Camie Kim is a writer living in Vancouver.**

**Louie Ettling lives in Vancouver, a Canadian of South African accent.**

## THE DISPLACED VIEW

**MIDI ONODERA**

**52 min., 1988**

**DEC, Toronto**

## TWO LIES

**PAM TOM**

**25 min., 1989**

**Women Make Movies, New York**

## FAMILY GATHERING

**LISE YASUI**

**30 min., 1988**

**New Day Films**

by Haruko Okano

I am a *Sansei* (third generation) Japanese Canadian. The Japanese/Chinese films *The Displaced View*, *Two Lies* and *Family Gathering* speak of much of what I have had to deal with: the loss of language and culture, the sense of shame, fear and low self-esteem. My own child-

hood experience was similar to that portrayed in Pam Tom's film *Two Lies*. By age nine, I had already been made aware that my physical differences were unacceptable. I started to save part of my 50-cent allowance towards an eye operation. I remember being too embarrassed to tell anyone about wanting the operation, but I felt it was better to have the operation than to be excluded for being unacceptably different. Over the years, I have come to understand that my response was a reaction to racism, created by my need to be accepted, especially by white males. The message was that it was the slant of my eyes, the colour of my skin and my hair that blocked my way to becoming one of them.

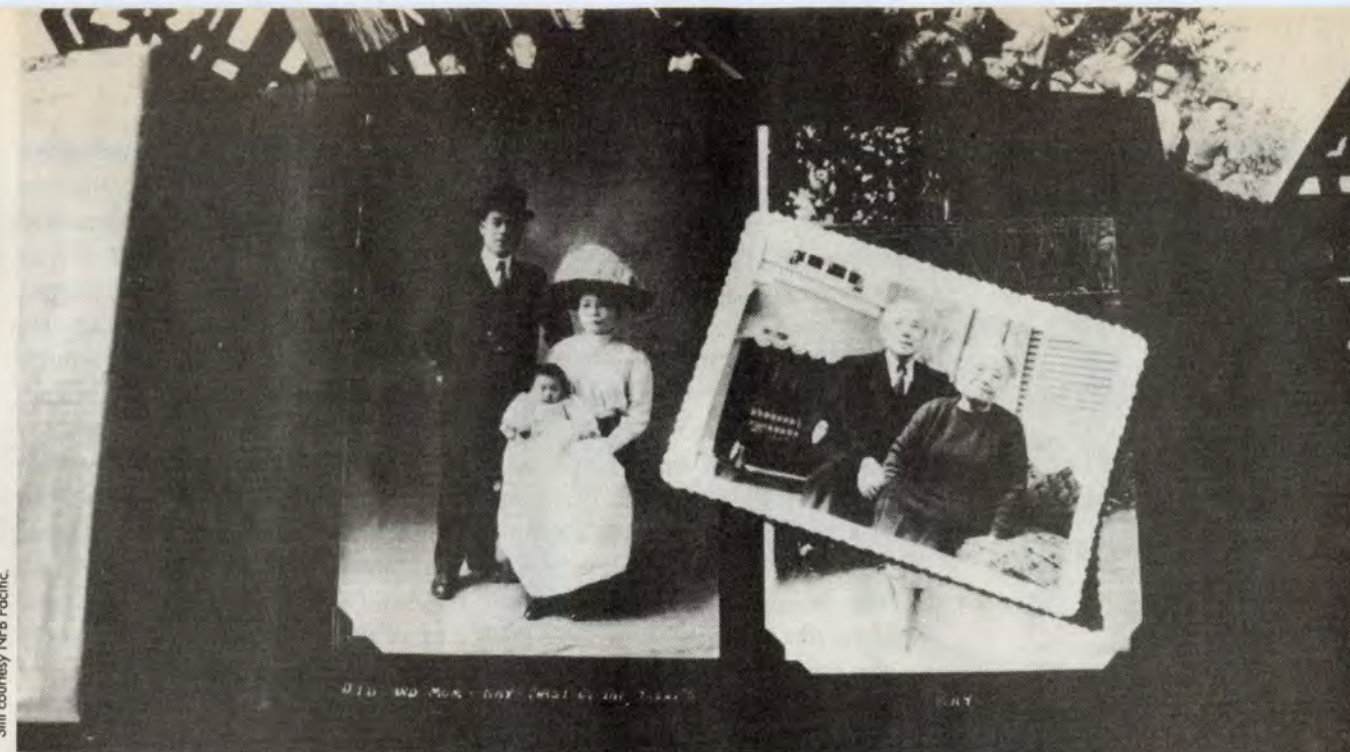
Even at that early age, I understood, on some level, that the "white male" symbolized acceptance into the dominant culture. The planned eye operation was my effort to become a "Suzy Wong"—the acceptably exotic and appealing Anglicized Asian female. Even now, in my mid 40s, I still feel uncomfortable when I see a photo of myself that emphasizes the slant of my eyes.

I wasn't aware of the internment and evacuation of my people until I was in my early 30s. My family never spoke of it. I remember as a child, hearing the family talking about going to Japan for a "vac-



Still from *The Displaced View* by Midi Onodera.

Still courtesy NFB Pacific



Still from *Family Gathering* by Lise Yasui.

tion." Now I realize that they may have been discussing forced repatriation to Japan. When I asked my aunt about internment her reply was, "It was good for us. Look, we are better off than we ever were." That seems to be a typical *Issei* and *Nisei* response. It may have been too much for them emotionally to deal with.

As in the films *The Displaced View* and *Family Gathering*, I too am trying to understand the attitude couched in the *Issei* and *Nisei* expression "*Shigata ga nai*" because it expresses so much of the way they seem to approach that part of our history. I am amazed by the lack of anger or bitterness on the part of the first two generations. It stands in contrast to my own anger, and, in trying to come to terms with the differences in our attitudes and approaches to the injustices we have suffered in in this country, I am frustrated. One might believe that they were protecting us by not sharing their feelings with us or telling us what was happening. Perhaps this was appropriate when we were children, but it remained that way even when we were old enough to understand, and needed to understand.

Because of the oppressive nature of racism I lost my first language and my first culture, both important to my iden-

tity and self-esteem. The pressure of racism was internalized in my family structure, and in myself—there remained no safe place free from its effects.

Through the films of Onodera and Yasui I can see the gentle, persistent strength of the elders, and also the hostility they had to endure in order to stay in this country. The fact that not all of them could go on, even after the apparent post-war changes, is tragically brought home by the suicide of Yasui's grandfather. That it took her father 28 years to be able to tell her about her grandfather's death indicates that their generation is still dealing with the internment in much the same way—with silence.

In seeing familiar faces among the drummers in *The Displaced View*, I felt my first surge of genuine pride in the fact that I am a Japanese Canadian. *Family Gathering* shattered an old myth that I was raised on. That myth was, "If you just try harder, work harder, be nicer and do all the right things better, you will be accepted into society with respect as a valued, contributing member."

In the film, the racist people in the grandfather's small community wiped out all he had been and all he had done to enhance their town. They reduced him in

their hearts and minds to a traitor—something he had never even considered. There was nothing he could say or do to change that belief. How does one grapple with such a sentence passed on you despite your innocence? Much of what he believed about his new country had been crushed.

Canada and the U.S.A. broke trust with us, especially the *Issei*—they shattered a dream to show us the illusion of democracy. As a member of a visible minority, I am proud that these works show Japanese Canadians with all their strengths, as humans who have survived despite the odds. It is exciting and inspiring to see Onodera and Yasui go back into their own histories in an effort to understand themselves and their families.

It validates what I have felt a need to do for years. I can't speak the language of my elders and I don't understand their customs or attitudes. I have been assimilated by the dominant culture enough to have become a stranger in my own family but not enough to blend in with white society. Like these women, I am trying to find the link between myself and the older generations. I am trying to answer my own questions about who I am and what shaped me. ■

Still courtesy DEC.



**RICHARD CARDINAL:  
CRY FROM A DIARY OF  
A METIS CHILD**

ALANIS OBIMSAWIN  
29 min., 1986  
NFB

**NATIVE DAUGHTER**

JENEVA SHAW  
2 min., 1989  
Distribution by the artist

**...AND THE WORD  
WAS GOD**

RUBY TRULY  
9 min., 1987  
Video Out, Vancouver

by Haruko Okano

In this second article, I want it understood that I do not seek to speak for Native people. Only they themselves have that right and the essential knowledge of their own experiences. So, in attempting to review Native films, I selected those that addressed experiences that parallel my

own—trusting in human nature and our historical similarities as people targeted by racism. Nevertheless, I am aware that being a “visible minority” doesn’t preclude me from having racist attitudes or misconceptions about the indigenous peoples, even though it is something I’ve worked hard on removing from myself.

In Canada, there is a lack of concern about the deep psychological impact of racism on the “first people,” as individuals, as societies and as Canada’s founding cultures. While we are quick to point the finger at repressive regimes like South Africa (the apartheid system was modelled on our reservation system), we ignore similar problems here. It is with these thoughts in mind that I would like to begin this review.

In Alanis Obimswim’s *Richard Cardinal: Cry from a Diary of a Métis Child*, the combination of Richard Cardinal’s journal monologue and interviews with some of the people who played a part in his short life makes the film ring with the disturbing truth of his suffering and loss within an insensitive and uncaring

bureaucratic system. How the system killed his will to live and how this was accomplished is neither over-dramatized nor distorted by the filmmaker. The documentary’s simplicity makes one feel like it is Richard’s spirit talking. No background music or panoramic settings have been added to make it entertaining. Richard Cardinal was a sensitive, gifted human being. The tragedy of his short life would have slipped into the unknown had it not been for the macabre efforts of his last foster father. (He photographed Richard’s hanging body and sent pictures to all the bureaucrats believed responsible for his neglect and abuse.)

*Richard Cardinal: Cry from a Diary of a Métis Child* questions the cultural starvation and disinheritance Native children endure as well as the negation of their need to maintain ties to their natural families when isolated in the dominant society. The abuse, neglect and degradation portrayed in this film unfortunately is not an isolated incident and it is shameful that it still exists. While all foster situations are not abusive, Obimswim points out the inadequacy of the service as it stands now. It’s ironic that the social services saw fit to fulfill Richard’s wish to be with his family only after his death, at his funeral. Society as a whole and the caregiver system must become sensitive and responsive to the needs of Native children within this predominantly white social system. To my knowledge, social services dealing with fostering haven’t made a conscious effort to consider a Native child’s cultural background, language and positive racial imaging as being essential to their wellbeing. “Clothing, shelter and food,” are not enough and no child can grow to psychological wholeness with only these minimum preconditions for life. While not all Native children die in this system, they continue to struggle with the other negative effects of living in the dominant society. For further insight into these issues, I recommend Obimswim’s film, *Poundmaker’s Lodge—a Place for Healing*. This film

and *Richard Cardinal: Cry from a Diary of a Métis Child* are available through the NFB.

Although Jeneva Shaw’s *Native Daughter* is only two minutes long, it has a strong message and impact. Going into the public school system is sometimes frightening enough but being beaten and tormented on the grounds of racial difference is devastating. This film shows how deeply this can effect a child. What I found particularly upsetting was the fact that these are children spewing out race hatred. Who teaches children to hate and be racist? *Native Daughter* is a shocking, ugly example of the effects of our adult role models. We, as adults, need to make conscious efforts to unlearn our racist attitudes. Racism is multigenerational. It is not the responsibility of children to heal this sickness—it is adults who have the power and the responsibility to do that.

The cinematic use of superimposing an image of the filmmaker (as an adult) protecting herself (as a child) reminded me of how isolated and helpless one can feel being the only one of your race on the school grounds with no allies. This reality increases vulnerability and the sense of social isolation and rejection. As adults, we should be protectors and caregivers for our children; yet, in our society, children are usually the most disempowered and because of their position of dependency on us, their feelings and rights are abused. For those of us who grew up here as children from a “visible minority” and experienced this kind of treatment, we don’t forget, as this film points out.

Ruby Truly’s film, *...And The Word Was God* gave me a sense of the anger and bitterness of someone inside the Native experience, dealing with Christian education. It brings to mind the horror stories involving members of various Christian orders in residential schools and the profound, long-lasting damage done there. The sexual and physical abuse, the mental and emotional soul murdering was done under the guise of administering



Still courtesy Video Out.

Still from *...And The Word Was God* by Ruby Truly.

ing education and God’s teachings. This was poisonous pedagogy given its greatest freedom and it was what many of these children were exposed to. A system that needs to negate the beliefs and cultural strengths of another society is abusive. A system whose judgement of others is based on the premise of its own superiority and which supports power over others in its favour is abusive.

In the film, a young naked girl reads aloud from a text, in a setting typical of white society. This image brings home how residential schools stripped these children of their identity, pride and sense of worth because of the belief that their culture, religion and language were inferior or bad. It is ironic that now, there is a growing interest and respect for these things which less than 50 years ago were being beaten out of Native children. Redress is long overdue for these injustices.

It is through the strength and courage of many in the Native community that we, in the dominant society, are being made aware of the effect that our cultural

and racial biases have had on Native people. Richard Cardinal’s story is one of the most powerful examples. All three films come from a child’s perspective and speak of the loss of self esteem and the negation of Native culture and race by the larger populace. The fear, the despair and the anger of these children’s voices rings with an authenticity that cannot be duplicated by someone outside of the Native experience. Only when these perspectives are presented by adults, in retrospect, do we seem to listen, weigh and re-evaluate what has been done. For Richard Cardinal, who spoke so clearly, it’s too late. Who pays the price of healing? There’s no romanticizing, no placating gestures, just honesty and feelings straight from the gut and I thank the filmmakers for their contributions to the *In Visible Colours* film festival. ■

Haruko Okano is a Vancouver artist and writer. She recently participated in *Others among Others*, an exhibition dealing with women artists of different ethnic backgrounds and discrimination.



Still courtesy NFB Canada.

Still from *Richard Cardinal: Cry from a Diary of a Métis Child*.



# Removing the Veil

**SYLVAT AZIZ**

**HIRA**

Midway Forum, Toronto  
October/November, 1989

**PARTITION SISTERS**

A Space, Toronto  
Nov. 29 - Dec. 22, 1989

*With chains of matrimony and modesty  
You can shackle my feet  
The fear will still haunt you  
That crippled, unable to walk  
I shall continue to think.*

Kishwar Naheed, contemporary Urdu poet

The response of conservative Moslems to art that criticizes Islamic practices can be quite severe. If *The Satanic Verses* earned author Salman Rushdie death threats, what then might happen to a woman who criticizes Islamic practices? Sylvat Aziz, a Pakistani artist now living in Canada, voices legitimate fears as to how her work will be understood by the Pakistani community. Her art speaks of a range of emotions and ideas: her love for the city of her birth, her appreciation for aspects of her Islamic heritage, her anger at the situation of women in Pakistan, and her defiance of the conservative politicians who interpret Islamic teachings in order to perpetuate the enslavement of women.

Sylvat Aziz was born in Lahore in 1954. The Pakistan she grew up and studied in saw many radical changes that affected her position as a woman in Pakistani society. In 1978, General Zia (who

came to power in a coup in 1977) announced his intention to Islamicize the penal code.

These changes led to gross injustices to women. Victims of rape are often imprisoned, on the assumption that they seduced their attacker. Husbands falsely accuse wives of *zina* (willful sex between two adults who are not validly married to each other—conviction under this offence may be punishable by death by stoning) in order to be rid of them. Women are imprisoned, many with their children, where they are abused and neglected. Many await trial for years because no one will pay their bail. Some are subjected to particularly inhumane treatment, imprisoned for years in cells reserved for those sentenced to death. Most have been falsely accused. Most will never be released.

Aziz's art-making is a powerful way that she, as a Pakistani woman, can claim her rights. In her work at both the Midway Forum and A Space, images of veiled women appeared with text from the laws and the Koran.

In *The Partition Sisters*, at A Space, she exhibited her work alongside the visually provocative work of Indian artist Sarinder Dhaliwal. The title of the exhibition refers to the division of the Punjab by the British in 1947. Together Aziz and Dhaliwal made a statement about the frustrations and dreams of women from India and Pakistan.

At A Space, Aziz's work was mounted unframed and the text was written directly on the wall. By this act she made an affirmation. "I don't want to call myself

anything but a Moslem. But we [women] are not used to what Islamization has done. We don't want to get used to it. It is unacceptable. This is not the way I want to live."

North America has given her the freedom to express herself and she has produced a body of work that combines personal and political concerns in a lyrical style. The style also reflects her heritage. The flattened figures and lack of perspective are related more to traditional fresco and manuscript illumination than to contemporary painting concerns. Script and folk design also accompany many of the figures in her prints and drawings. In her larger works she combines a number of media and techniques: collage, etching and drawing with pigments and print-making inks.

The overpowering image in the exhibition was that of the veiled woman. *Purdah*—the segregation and veiling of women in Islam—has effectively cut them off from all aspects of a normal social and public life. Aziz says, "I am interested in exploring and communicating the dichotomy between the rhythm of a free-flowing, living tradition and the oppressive yoke of fundamentalism which subverts

it... the images consist of tall, dark veiled female figures, almost architectural, containers or zombie structures not meant to be benign, juxtaposed with each other or everyday street colours."

"The Bazaar" depicts the striking yellow wall of a famous mosque in Lahore that borders the red light district. "I've just taken all the men out," says Aziz. But they are alluded to by the presence of a pimp's garishly coloured car. The black-veiled women hover ambiguously so that one is not sure if they are shrouded prostitutes or simply women entering the mosque to pray. The most striking of these works is "Shaminanah." It combines many elements and, as a result, is rich in content. Veiled women flank the central portion of the drawing. Two patterned sections contain specific Pakistani references: one is a *shaminanah*, a multi-coloured canvas structure used to separate and enclose women at public functions. The other recalls a pattern from a courtyard in Lahore where it is believed an Emperor watched prostitutes dance for their freedom or death. The centre of the work depicts many windows, barred or closed, alluding to the women behind. In one window, a garish nude (subway

graffiti found by the artist in New York) suggests the photographs Pakistani pimps use to sell their women. It is a demanding and revealing piece. Other works, such as "Tawis" and "Yaqt," are more personal and celebrate the more positive aspects of a woman's life in Pakistan. Rounded shapes echo the female form. They are inspired by aspects of folk culture: a magic stone of love and passion, and a talisman to ward off the evil eye.

These juxtapositions are visually alluring, rich in colour and texture, and inextricably linked to her personal experience.

*Hira*, the title of an earlier exhibition at Midway Forum, refers to the desert cave in which the prophet received the revelations contained in the Koran. The cave of "Hira" can be interpreted as womb or a black pit. Her most powerful statements in this show were two rich and tactile artist's books. Heavy with pigments and print-making inks, symbolic markings violate the rules against representation of the Koran and, in one, pages with cut-away doors and windows allude to that closed system of belief.

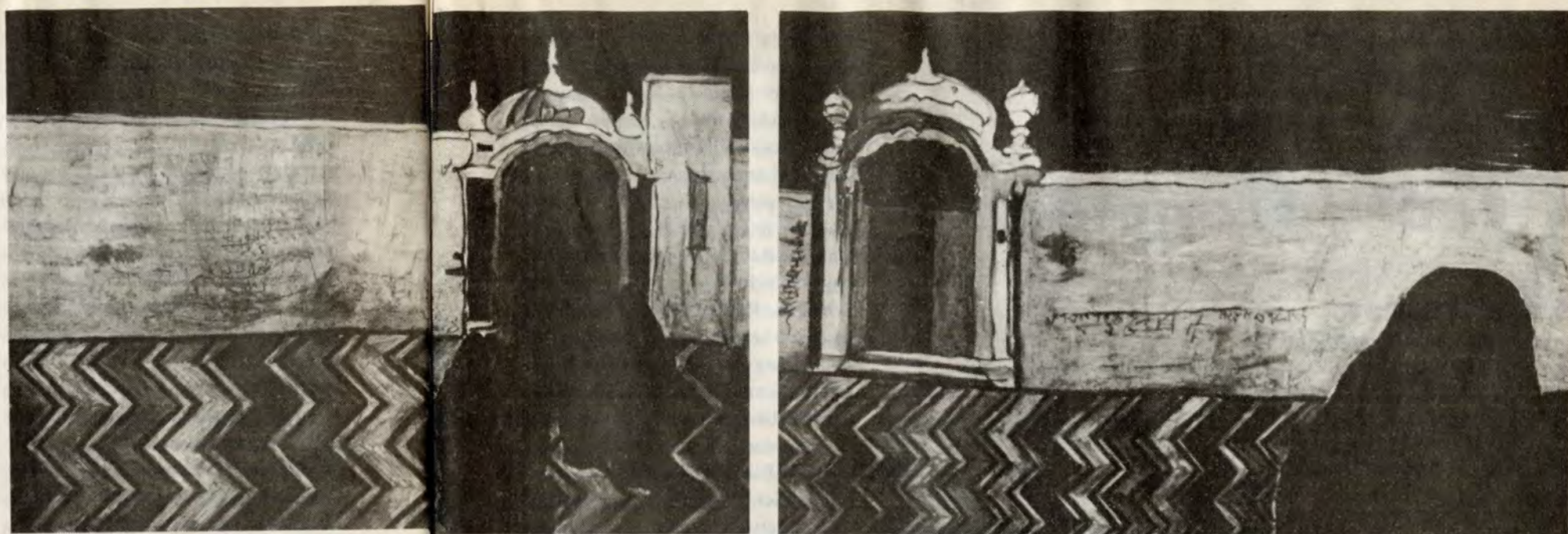
Women journey to shrines (one of the few outings they are allowed) and have,

through their folk art traditions, contributed to their beauty—but the tradition that provides such beauty also restricts and confines these women. These contradictions are evident in Aziz's work. The powerful and evocative images in this exhibition allowed it to stand as a challenge to both Pakistani and Western audiences.

The A Space show did not represent her work as powerfully as did the exhibition at Midway Forum. Presented as part of a two-person show, the work was not focused as clearly on a central theme and the individual pieces lost some of their effectiveness.

It is unusual for Canadian audiences to see work so clearly inspired by a culture almost totally unknown to us. Sylvat Aziz's art opens windows on a world whose imagery—and repressiveness—is striking. As an artist, she is developing a style and presenting content that is both unique and inspiring. It is encouraging to see that it is still possible to make political art that is visually riveting. ■

**Pam Patterson** is a Toronto performance artist, administrator and freelance writer.



Two details from "The Bazaar".

Photo by John Oughton.



# Tested Fictions & Twisted Fragments

## 4 NEW WORKS

**FRAGMENTS** (Paula Fairfield)  
**TONGUE TIED AND TWISTED** (Joyann Saunders)  
**GOOD CLEAN FICTION** (Gary Kibbins)  
**TEST** (Rowley Mossop)  
 The Euclid Theatre, Toronto  
 December 2, 1989

by Susan Rynard

The screening of *4 New Works* clearly indicates that artists/directors are currently exploring a multiplicity of divergent strategies in the making of tapes that fall under the all too equivocal term "video art." Yet, when discussing video art, more often than not the work is assessed in terms relative to other disciplines. For example, video art is often considered within the critical framework of either film (is this a drama, or a documentary?), or the visual arts (is this conceptual or sculptural?), or television (video art, hmmm, isn't that where artists with porta packs liberate TV?).

Questions like these are limiting. They also lead to a situation where video art is defined in relation to what it is not, rather than to what it is. Understandably, video artists are becoming increasingly disgruntled with the type of discourse that circulates around their work. As the recent screening of *4 New Works* demonstrates, the strategies currently being employed by video artists resist the definitive boundaries imposed by, and upon, other disciplines. Thus the value of assessing the work using these same critical perimeters is quickly negated.

Rowley Mossop's *Test* is loosely based on the case of Rudi Steinman and the issue of mandatory HIV testing. *Test* opens with a male doctor's "all in a days

work" voice-over monologue. Merged with images of hospital stairwells, an underground garage and a night drive, he speaks first as if to a colleague, then to the viewer, then to himself. With a measured tone, he expresses concern over a patient who might test HIV-positive. As a physician, it seems that even his interior monologue is governed by professional ethics. Then the viewpoint shifts from the doctor to a surrogate interrogator. This man seems to be a stand in, but for whom—the health care system? a social worker? an analyst? the public? or all of these figures and institutions? An interview of sorts between Steinman and the interrogator is continually interrupted by extreme close-ups of children's toy figures. The doll house, the blue family Ford, and the "Super Male," who re-enact the stories described in the voice-over, serve as iconic references to the ideals of mass culture. Seditiously, *Test* does not conclude, it ends.

While Paula Fairfield's *Fragments* is a dense and complicated work, it manages to maintain a refreshing accessibility. Over the course of seven minutes, themes emerge, circulating around various aspects of women and technology. *Fragments* opens with an evocative scene of Maria-Teresa Larrain gazing at herself in the mirror—the oldest reproduction

technology that uses light and refraction—as she reads aloud from a romance novel. Her identity is both constructed within, and inscribed by, language as she acts out her identification with the novel's heroine. Larrain is soon recorded by a nervous photographer, who frames a mediated image produced by the camera lens. The theme of reproduction technology is playfully articulated by parallel narratives. Reverend Tom's (Andrew J. Paterson) sermon on TV discusses the immaculate conception of the Virgin Mary, while a young technical whiz (Sheri Kowall) has just tested "positive" with her drug store pregnancy test kit.

Paula Fairfield describes *Fragments* as a "trailer." Whereas commercial film trailers serve primarily as advertising aiming to encapsulate the film's main dramatic plot in an exciting and titillating manner, *Fragments* presents a sort of inverted study of all this. The sound-track both implores with sensational tones and entices with sonorous lyrical seduction. Titles introduce us to the characters, and the dramatic action is framed by a filmic mise en scène. However, while a commercial trailer seeks to sum up, *Fragments* seeks to break apart, the visual and audio materials chosen subtly disrupt the hegemonic "truth" of the image surface. Specific images in *Fragments* were shot on film, others on video and some originated in electronic sources, in this case TV and a pixel board sign. These images were subsequently taken through several layers of translation to produce a final work that is available on both film and video. All in all, *Fragments* is a beautifully produced work that demonstrates both skill and an economy of image. It is a work that deserves to be viewed many times.

Even as the title of Gary Kibbins's tape, *Good Clean Fiction*, prepares us for a work that will comically negate the traditional TV/film genres of "good clean (all-American) fiction," it also evokes a kind of word-play of opposites. Throughout the tape we are presented with various

scenarios that are structured around the binary relationships of good vs. bad, clean vs. dirty and fiction vs. non-fiction. As the tape begins, an all-American boy is being rejected because he is simply "too clean." (He is rejected by a very serious woman who is "looking for laughs," get the picture?) As the tape unfolds we have a CIA scandal and a series of job dismissals and then Mike the mechanic discovers that the theory on which the internal combustion engine is based is false. Cars will never work again. Later a woman is reprimanded by her boss for causing the entire nuclear industry to collapse, and one inquisitive man has caused the complete ruin of the economic system.

*Good Clean Fiction's* sound-track braces us for a patriotic tear jerker, as the once "too clean" protagonist (who now wears shredded, greasy, dirty clothes) attempts, with his friend, to discuss the greatest aspirations of humanity, and while doing so they accidentally murder their roommate. But wait, there is hope. The pioneering spirits that brought us the "mission to Mars" (not only "a great investment," but it will provide "those with stale jokes a new place to laugh") raises Lazarus from the dead and cleans the kitchen.

Somewhere in the midst of this rather complex "plot" line, the viewer is confronted with a real time (at first silent) image of a "real" mechanic (as opposed to the earlier fictional mechanic) changing a tire. The placement of this real time image within an otherwise densely constructed narrative creates a moment of discomfort for the viewer. I believe this sequence is constructed in this fashion not just to make us feel uncomfortable as it seems at first, but to deliberately provoke the important and serious question: "how do I read this?" And this, I would argue, is an underlying project of the entire tape.

The story of Jane, the heroine of Joyann Saunders's tape *Tongue-Tied and Twisted*, is offered up in a complex narrative that employs both symbolic and vis-



Still from *Tongue Tied and Twisted* by Joyann Saunders.

ual vocabulary. Jane has spent some time answering some of the major questions of our decade, such as, what are the alternative uses for plastic bags, compressed air and the dollar bill? Or, how can I subvert this household item to make my life as a woman easier?—a difficult task since domestic appliances ostensibly liberated all women years ago. More seriously, how can I gain more control over my life as a woman? Jane's predicament becomes a crisis that manifests itself in obsessive and compulsive behaviour bordering on the neurotic. She dries her underwear in the oven, dusts her knick-knacks with compressed air, slips her shoes on with a crisp bill and protects her hairdo by covering it with a plastic bag before pulling on her sweater. She's also discovered a unique way to avoid nasty panty lines: just pull your blouse through the bottom of your underwear and you'll be creaseless right down to your knees. The voice-over text provides insight into Jane's motives: "Her hair frames not just her

face but her entire existence. . . ." She experiences a certain dislocation between her speech and her brain, claiming that for years she was only able to speak in "monosyllabic utterances." Jane's alienation from language is illustrative of her position outside of the patriarchal order. Yet Saunders treats her themes with an ironic twist; issues of the female position in the male order are humorously reinforced when Jane and her girlfriend take a walk to the "golden triangle" with its recently transplanted rows of phallic palm trees.

As Saunders discusses the extreme self-consciousness of women (a woman is "accompanied by a mental image of herself at all times"), we are reminded of an earlier Jane. As she adds the final touches to her face and body in the mirror (camera), we can see a kitsch painting of a young bright-eyed Mexican soldier-girl hanging behind her, leaving the viewer with a striking portrait of the ideological forces at work in the construction of



female image. *Tongue Tied and Twisted* ends, however, with a more disturbing image of Jane waving to her shadow. She appears almost skeletal with her neck elongated, her body distorted. One can't fail to associate this image with an earlier daunting aural image of a starving dog and the visual image of "Day of the Dead" skulls. Jane's departure in this work is without optimism. One can, however, find something positive in this ending. Although the status quo teaches us to demand not only happy endings but closure from a work, forcing an incredible imposition on the work and burdening it with a moral imperative, *Tongue Tied and Twisted* resists both these tendencies.

It is important to acknowledge that, however problematic, these works resist using media language or form in traditional ways. In the past it was low-tech and low-budget that became equated with works of resistance. Yet as these four tapes demonstrate, current strategies are much more subtle and varied, and cannot be reduced to the simple equations of dollars and technology.

The fact that there is so little written about video (especially in the popular press) may have as much to do with the complexity of the strategies involved, as the diversity of the work produced. Whatever the reason, the lack of an all encompassing critical paradigm is not because of a lack of interest or discussion about video works, but more importantly, speaks of the work's resistance to being canonized, categorized, and, ultimately, consumed. In light of this, my discussion of *4 New Works* must be seen as only one view, part of an on-going and necessary dialogue acknowledging that the divergent strategies that exist within video work should also exist in their discussion. ■

**Susan Rynard is a Toronto-based video artist.**

## EXHIBITION

# Detonate! (They Blew Up Real Good)

## SPONTANEOUS COMBUSTION

954 King Street West, Toronto  
November 3 - 30, 1989

by Randi Spires

Spontaneous combustion is usually an accidental and destructive process, quite different from the methodical and constructive effort that went into putting together this multi-media art exhibition of the same name. The 15 disparate artists who make up the Spontaneous Combustion collective are not, at this juncture, about to set the art world on fire but they did manage to independently organize a thoughtful, occasionally provocative show of mostly current work.

The exhibit was held in the abandoned Massey-Ferguson showroom, situated on the fringe of Toronto's ever westward-creeping art scene. This huge space, over 10,000 square feet, once displayed machines thought to be at the cutting edge of agricultural technology—instruments meant to dominate the natural world without destroying it. The razed landscape yields nothing but detritus, the building blocks of culture and imagination perhaps, but not very (physically) nourishing.

Given the site of the exhibition, it is quite fitting that many of the artists in this show were comfortable with various technological processes yet they remained critical of the relationships between technology and culture and the natural world.

For instance "Luxury," by Al Letts, shows a woman in a bubble bath whose foamy surface resembles more the scum from a polluted river than anything one would want to linger in. The surface of the water is a mirror, a device that ties the

viewer into the processes that produced this mess. Absence of responsibility is a luxury we can ill afford.

Laura Kikauka's installation, "Terminally Ill," criticizes the use of advanced technology to artificially extend human life. But rather than repellent, the spasmodically jerking body, the green twinkling L.E.D.-infused vomit and the ghoulishly groaning video monitor head are amusing, if only in puerile way.

Gwen MacGregor's installation utilized the windows of the showroom to question the role of the artist within the urban landscape. Her conclusions are not optimistic. The main beneficiaries of the cultural and economic resources of a neighbourhood are not the native inhabitants but the suburban colonists who extract resources and pleasures from the area while feeling little responsibility for the place and viewing "community art" as something akin to graffiti.

This part of the installation is not, however, particularly visually arresting. More effective are three monitors two of which summarize, in a mock-anthropological study, the conditions of artists in the '80s—poor, powerless and the unwitting abettors of gentrification. The central monitor criticizes the role of the gallery in sequestering art from its social and political context. "The museum makes all times and places yours for the taking," it says, suggesting that art presented in this environment is something of a shell game. MacGregor may be hopeful about

this quandary (she is still making art) but she hasn't given the viewer any notion of the way out.

"LC-50" by Sam Weller is a more amusing construction. Weller's foot-high robots waddle and whirr about the glass display case where they are confined. They constantly bump into one another and then awkwardly change course like the bumper cars at a carnival midway. The installation is about technology that is contained, controlled and utilized for the sheer fun of it. But it's a mistake to imagine that technology can ever be benignly constrained within the bounds of the playhouse. More sophisticated versions of the same techniques that produced this amusement may well be used by industry to put people out of work, perhaps permanently. On the other hand, such robots could also be used in dangerous situations, potentially saving human lives. The point is we shouldn't be charmed into not paying attention to the full range of implications presented by any new invention.

In a sense, even pleasure is suspect. What does it mean to spend our leisure time mesmerized by mechanical or electronic spectacles rather than interacting with one another?

Weller's robots have upper limbs but

neither lower limbs nor heads. Their transparent bodies leave the raw circuitry exposed. Their clumsy movements, along with their exposed innards, give them a childlike appeal. But to what effect? This tendency of human beings to anthropomorphize everything from teddy bears to armoured tanks bears thinking on.

In "Home Rule," an installation by b.h. Yael, everything is covered with fun fur—that sanitized synthetic substance which covers the bodies of stuffed animals. In this case, the rational desire to protect a child from the very real dangers of the natural world have been taken to an absurd extreme. Everything from cups to clocks to fruit has been encased in blue-rinsed fuzz. But, even with the help of technology, one can't eliminate all problems.

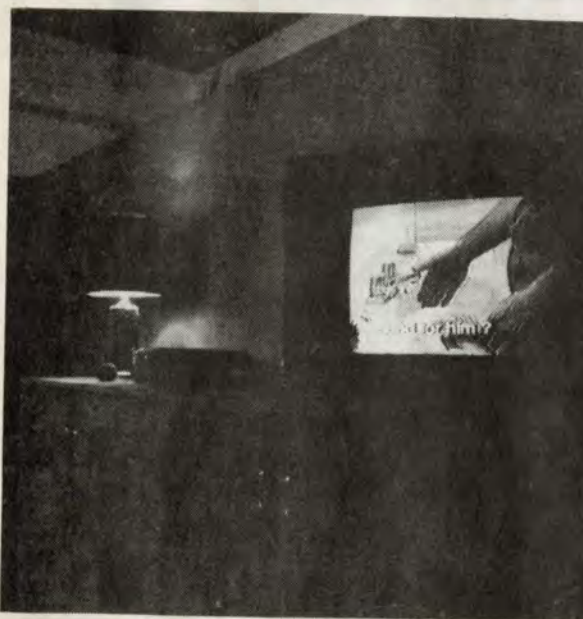
On either side of the display, at child height, are video monitors. On one, a nine-month-old infant eats, plays and screams. On the other a couple, presumably his parents, make love and engage in a relentless round of domestic tasks, with both father and mother sharing these duties. The text demonstrates how substantial amounts of energy and negotiation must be expended to ensure an equitable balance is kept between career and domestic demands and among the tasks

done by each partner. During moments of exhaustion one can imagine either parent succumbing to the temptation of reverting to traditional roles.

On the sound-track of this second monitor is the authoritative voice of the late Lorne Greene describing a day in the life of a pair of coyotes. Because the mother with pups is lame, the male has assumed the full burden of breadwinning (hunting) Greene opines. Comforting as this report may be to some conservative ideologists, the domestic arrangements of small canines cannot be used as a model for human beings, principally because our social lives are so much more complex. Also what Greene is describing may not be what is in fact going on. If it's easy to anthropomorphize clear-bellied robots, how much easier is it to do the same with living animals.

The *Spontaneous Combustion* exhibition was funded by both the Canada Council and the Toronto Arts Council. At the time they applied, the Ontario Arts Council had no category that would have allowed them to fund groups not associated with established institutions. Thanks to the work of this collective, this may change. ■

**Randi Spires is a Toronto freelance writer and broadcaster.**



Photos by Ian Smith-Rubenzahl

**Home Rule by b. h. Yael. (L) Installation view. (R) Detail.**



# EXHIBITION

## Off the Beaten Track

### THE PATIO SHOW

Arcadia Rooftop, Toronto  
Sept. 23 - Oct. 8, 1989

### THE CROSSING

Bloor Street United Church, Toronto  
Oct. 17 - Dec. 10, 1989

As exhibition space for artists in Toronto diminishes almost as fast as the rate of work produced for public consumption increases, artists are organizing shows in alternative venues. These exhibitions in alternative spaces are not simply a reflection of the shortage of traditional gallery space. Rather, they reflect the importance many artists place on bringing their work to an audience different from traditional gallery audiences. But more importantly, these artists use the context of whichever public space their work is placed in order to establish meaningful dialogue between the work and its environment, text and context.

*The Patio Show* was the inaugural exhibition of the mysteriously titled 23rd Room. It featured the work of 11 sculptors on the roof of Arcadia, a cooperative apartment building at Harbourfront. (Although Arcadia is an artists' co-operative, it had nothing to do with organizing or curating the show, and none of the artists involved live there.)

The building, situated on the corner of Queen's Quay and Bishop Tutu Blvd., has the permanent primary school feel of institutions that attempt to temper their prudent functionality with human, "livable" touches. The concrete blocks and blue metal railing on the rooftop pro-

vided a suitably neutral environment for the work.

Joel Wengle's playful "Gargoyle with Water" leans over the curved wall of the multi-storied building like a giant bubble-headed cartoon character and is visible from street level. Despite (or more likely because of) the piece's witty commentary on this building and surrounding architecture, the residents purchased it so it can remain a permanent fixture. Although it is the only piece that comments directly on its site, most of the other

works demonstrate a tacit consciousness of their surroundings. They may or may not be considered site-specific installations, but the syntactic wavering between text and context provides for a greater focusing of semantic possibilities than would a gallery's walls.

Teresa Dobrowolska's "Cargoes," which incorporates flat, jagged pieces of gray cement as well as old luggage, text, xerox, and audio, benefits from its placement along the western wall of the building, facing Lake Ontario and the planes taking off and landing at the Island Airport. Facing the opposite direction, toward the skyline of the city's financial district, is an untitled piece by Michael Longford, which involves a trestle of wooden ladder-like structures supporting a curving railway line. A colourful house-like structure on wheels rests on this and is topped by an elongated wax figure.

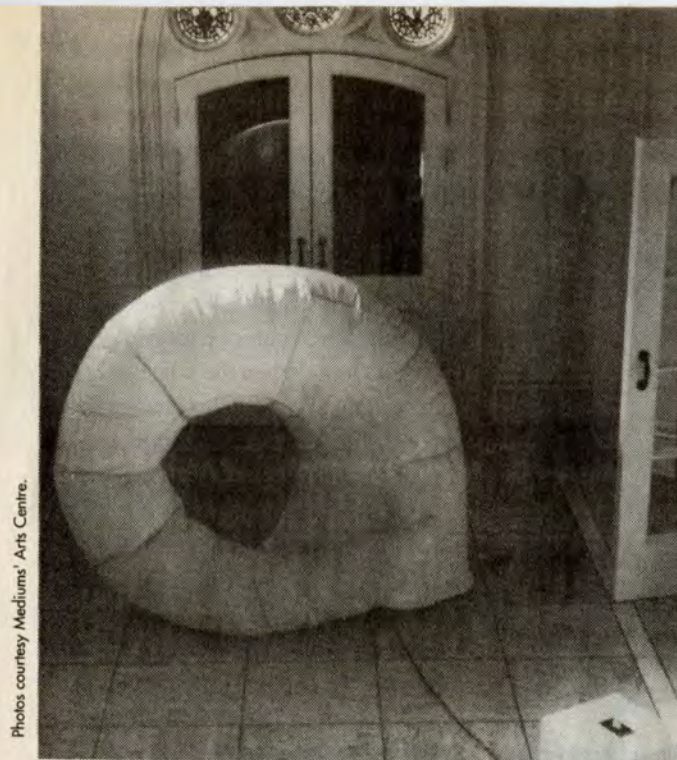
Carl Tacon's "Vertebral Structure" beautifully establishes a metaphor between the geological and biological. It is composed of flagstone fragments which resemble the cement blocks of the rooftop enough to push the metaphor into the architectural.

A complex, if ultimately unresolved piece, John Notten's "Monument" shows



Cargoes (detail) by Teresa Dobrowolska.

Photo by Saatchi Young



Photos courtesy Mediums' Arts Centre.

Sculpture by Larry Streicher.

a large rusted steel lion surrounded by a roughly circular wooden structure that functions, for about 120 degrees, as a diminishing passageway with peepholes through which one gets increasingly smaller glimpses of the lion.

Other works include an untitled sculpture by Anna Lefsrud, which places impossibly delicate-looking paper and wax constructions on top of a tall metal table-like structure. Barb Webb's untitled piece features a throne-like fire engine red wooden patio chair surrounded by five trees—logs on castors topped by wooden flames. The enigmatic presence of this piece did not diminish its humour—and vice versa. Artists Gail Esau, John Redekop, Veronica Verkley and Lois Anderson also participated.

*The Crossing* featured the site-specific work of a dozen artists installed throughout the Bloor Street United Church. Presented by the Mediums' Arts Centre of Toronto, a non-profit organization founded by Benny Benas, Heidi Kinnon and Kelly McCray, this was their second exhibition, the first being *The Vehicle Project*. (As well they publish *The Art Stimulus*) Part of their mandate is to involve the public through workshops, lectures and tours. Visitors have the op-

tion of a guided tour or picking up a map and hunting down the dozen works installed throughout the labyrinthine building by themselves.

Alex de Cosson combines cherry wood, cedar, steel and bolts with panels of stained glass he discovered in the church's basement. The piece, titled "Cherries" was constructed, and remains, in the basement.

Most of the pieces are on the main floor but many are integrated into the church to an extent that it is often difficult to determine what is exhibition and what actually "belongs." In the narthex (vestibule leading into the church proper), John McCartney installed "Map Part 1," a translucent map of the world made of circuit board, wood and metal that fits into the ceiling below fluorescent lights.

Ann Buttrick's "High Anxiety" is the skeleton of a boat-like structure made of copper and steel. It somehow manages to support the full weight of its symbolic significance as it hangs suspended in the choir. Catherine McPherson's "One Body with Many Parts" is a series of copper panels depicting hands. These panels look perfectly at home against the dark wood panels of the church's gallery. (Also part of this piece is a series of aluminum



Chalk and charcoal drawing by Andrew McPhail.

panels placed in the hall surrounding the Sunday school rooms.)

One piece that does not attempt to integrate itself into either the architectural or signifying aspects of the church is Larry Streicher's piece. Installed in a secluded hallway, it consists of a parachute material construction connected to a vacuum cleaner, which causes the construction to inflate when activated by the viewer. Drawings exploring this untitled piece's semantic possibilities are placed away from it in a stairwell.

Andrew McPhail's untitled work rewards those with the persistence and ingenuity to locate it. Positioned over two floors of the church's tower, it consists of various drawings (a chair, a set of teeth) on the walls and floor. Some of the drawings are obvious, but others, because of their size and location, must be hunted down, providing a truly architectural experience.

Artists Alistair Maxwell, Cecelia Vargas, Mary-Ann Kokoska, Alexandra Waschtschuk, Alastair Maxwell, Anne Devitt and Hope Thompson were also featured. ■

Steve Reinke is a writer and video artist who lives in Toronto and Montreal.



# Three Thumbs Up

## FESTIVAL INTERNATIONAL DU NOUVEAU CINEMA ET DE LA VIDEO DE MONTREAL

October 19 - 29, 1989

by Molly Shinhat

Montreal probably hosts more film and video festivals than any other Canadian city. At last count, the figure was over 100. Of those, about 12 major festivals continue to pursue the eyes and wallets of cinephiles and non-cinephiles alike with big brassy ad campaigns. The Festival International du Nouveau Cinéma et de la Vidéo de Montréal is the oldest of this eclectic group. The 18th edition took place this year from the 19th to the 29th of October in four cinemas in the city's core. Directors Claude Chamberlain and Dimitri Eipides attempted to put the festival at the vanguard of the Montreal scene. A component of that effort was the screening of high definition productions. That is the medium that purportedly contains at least five times the visual information of regular TV. It is being described as the film of the future. Yet despite the festival's commitment to new technology, screenings got off to a rocky start because of (you guessed it!) technical problems.

Opening with Atom Egoyan's much awaited (and over-exposed film), *Speaking Parts* and ending with Peter Brook's *The Mahabharata*, the 1989 Festival International du Nouveau Cinéma et de la Vidéo de Montréal did manage to include quite a number of interesting, if not fascinating films and videos.

### AIDS: A News Demonstration BOB HUFF The Kitchen, New York Video, 1988

The ingredients of network news coverage are all here—the standup, the cut-away, the archive footage, the expert(s), and the (objective) reporter. For anyone who has ever wanted to better understand how network news manufactures consent and constructs a mirage of objectivity, this is the video to see. Director Bob Huff has taken a prime time news item on AIDS funding and deconstructed it. The “event”—a demonstration protesting the underfunding of AIDS research—had taken place on Wall Street (NYC) earlier that day.

The tape opens with the above item, which one assumes appears as it was broadcast, at regular speed. The female anchor for News 4 introduces the report and we cut to a woman News 4 reporter who takes the viewer to the demonstration. The news clip shows irate commuters complaining about the inconvenience (the protesters at one point block the street), police hassling the demonstrators, and the generic “AIDS policy expert”—a straight white male.

At the end of the item, the viewer sees it being rewound and then rescreened with some minor but very significant

changes. Using the original reporter's voice-over describing the demonstration, Huff's rendition shows archival footage of a civil rights demonstration. Police are beating the demonstrators with batons. Continuity is maintained because the visuals last no longer than the voice-over. As in the original version, this change whizzes by with just enough time for the viewer to understand what it is.

Huff uses computer-generated graphics of the Reagan administration's “Star Wars” plan to replace the original news item's footage of a research lab. The voice-over remains unchanged—a doctor saying the country is doing the best it can. Aside from the obvious irony, the Star Wars footage looks as if it was taken from another network news item.

In the original version the reporter intervenes at this point asking if the amount of funding already being channelled into AIDS research is not sufficient. Freezing that frame on the right-hand side of the screen, Huff puts a question on the left-hand side, “Isn't that a lot of money spent on homosexuals?”

Huff inserts other footage and alters the original voice-over in the rest of his version. It all happens so quickly—at the same speed as the original item—that I began to realize just how quickly these items go by.

In this short work, Huff makes all his points without using a sledgehammer and without frustrating or boring viewers with a standard dogmatic critique. What is particularly laudable about *AIDS: A News Demonstration* is that it makes connections between different struggles in both a contemporary and a historical context. Finally as the title suggests, the piece accurately describes how network news is a demonstration of what the mainstream media machine can do. Representation(s) in news items can and are scripted and constructed in various ways—with new and improved biases built in before the event(s) the item attempts to inform us of. Finally, the tape ingeniously illuminates the manner in

which network news pays no attention to processes. By altering the original tape, Huff creates a context for the discrimination against people living with AIDS and also for their friends and supporters—something network news almost by definition and by its structure will always fail to do.

### JAMES BALDWIN: The Price of the Ticket KAREN THORSEN & DOUGLAS K. DEMPSEY Maysles Films, New York Film, 1989

James Baldwin, a Black American gay writer died of stomach cancer in 1987. Karen Thorsen, a white American writer, originally intended to make a film focusing on Baldwin's book *Remember This House*. The book, which was never completed, was to be Baldwin's scrutiny of the past, an observation of the United States a couple of decades after the civil rights movement. Some of his source material was to have consisted of interviews with the children of assassinated civil rights leaders.

After absorbing the shock of Baldwin's death, Thorsen said only two possibilities remained for her—to make a film “preaching to the converted” or to make a biographical film about Baldwin's life and work. She chose the latter. *James Baldwin: The Price of the Ticket* is the result.

Many Montrealers already familiar with the film after its recent screening on PBS waited patiently for its screening here. Both festival screenings were sold out a couple of hours before showtime, with people outside still hoping to get in.

To the extent that one can make a film that encompasses the life of such a revered writer, the film is more or less successful, however, it suffers from a resemblance to made-for-TV documentaries, largely because of the more than liberal use of a series of talking heads.

Still, some aspects of the film estab-



Still from *James Baldwin: The Price of the Ticket*.

lish it as a truly outstanding work. I am referring in particular to the arduous labour of the researchers. Collectively they found archival footage from no less than 107 different sources in nine countries.

This footage is not only singular because of its quantity and rarity, but more importantly, because of the kind of glimpses of Baldwin's life that re-present themselves to an audience that probably never dreamed these incidents could have been recorded: Baldwin on the Dick Cavett Show, Baldwin walking in a market in Turkey, Baldwin—being very camp—giving the camera a tour of one of his homes, Baldwin on his return to America. The film almost rotates around this archival footage. It's all in the film, and it is wonderful.

The remainder of the film contains scenes of the writer's extraordinary funeral, interviews with his brother David, writers Maya Angelou, William Styron, Amiri Baraka, Ishmael Reed and Yashar Kemal, painter Lucien Happersberger, entertainer Bobby Short, and his biographer David Leeming. The testimony of David Baldwin, in particular, illustrates the depth of James Baldwin's relation-

ships with those he loved—friends, family and lovers.

For example, in a sequence remarkable for the intimacy it reveals, David Baldwin describes the agony his brother went through in writing *Another Country*, the novel often called his masterpiece. David would gently ask him whenever he emerged from his work room how the characters were doing. His brother did not always have an encouraging response.

Upon the book's completion, James Baldwin was to meet his biographer, David Leeming. Leeming claims he met Baldwin while attending a party at Baldwin's house. He walked in, asking where James could be found. After being pointed in the right direction, Leeming entered the room. The first thing Baldwin said to him was, “It's finished, baby.” Leeming smiles as he recounts the story.

Representation around Baldwin's sexual identity, and the painful experiences he had to face with regard to it, receive scant attention. In the film, interviewers of Baldwin refer to it but in no great detail. The dominant discourse of this film revolves around race. Thorsen says



that at its different stages, the film was shown to various "camps." She made some changes after these screenings, but her initial concern was the response of Baldwin's mother to the film. Mrs. Baldwin liked the final result.

**YAABA**  
IDRISSA OUEDRAOGO  
Film, 1988

*Yaaba* is a warm and impressive meditation on the nature of a relationship between a young boy, a young girl and an older woman. Bila is a 12-year-old boy, and Sana is an aging woman who has been expelled from the village on the suspicion of practicing witchcraft. Defying the orders of the village elders, Bila and his young female friend Nopoko, continue to take food to the old women. After a time, they begin calling her "Yaaba," or grandmother.

When such a relationship is the subject of a film, the result seldom explores it with the passion, complexity and lack of artifice evident in *Yaaba*.

Part of the film's accomplishment comes through the use of so-called "non-professional" actors and actresses. A number of them are members of director Idrissa Ouedraogo's own family.

The relationships between the principal characters—Sana, Bila, Bila's mother, and Nopoko—draw the viewer into the film and show the complexities of life in a small village in Burkina Faso. Sana's influence on Bila is revealed to us almost like a song in which the melody remains the same but all other elements are in a state of flux. From the beginning we know that Bila has taken a great risk in befriending Sana and that risk continues to increase.

When Nopoko develops a fever that threatens to kill her, and the medicines of the local healers do not cure her, Bila sets off in search of Sana. It is only with her cure that Nopoko recovers.

Born in 1954 in what was then Upper Volta, now Burkina Faso, director Idrissa Ouedraogo has directed several short films and the feature, *Yam Daabo* (1986). In committing *Yaaba's* story to film, Ouedraogo does not stumble into the rut of showing only positive images. Other narratives wend their way through the film, exposing varied levels and types of oppression. For example, the expulsion of a woman and her children from her husband's home, and the manifest hypocrisy of the villagers with regard to their united condemnation of Sana. Magnificently shot and paced, *Yaaba* is constructed to allow the viewer to savour every moment of the film as it unfolds.

**THE MAHABHARATA**  
PETER BROOK  
Reiner Moritz Associates,  
London  
Film, 1989

To exhaust every avenue of criticism I have for this film would take much more than the space I have here. I have not read *The Mahabharata* and so am merely

acquainted with the text. However, I feel compelled to share some of my thoughts on the example of orientalism and cultural imperialism that this film provides.

Brook's *Mahabharata*. Even adding that prefix makes me cringe, and yet there is no way around it because Brook et al have distorted its meaning, its structure and its context almost beyond recognition.

The film amply demonstrates a phenomenon an Asian friend once described to me. She said she had often seen white people, especially white artists, look at the culture of the Other as a grand and luscious department store. All they do is go into the store, pick up what they want, pay less than the actual value of it or pay in fake notes, and leave. When they get home, they are not always congratulated for their "shopping"—this kind of cultural appropriation is seen as a matter of course. The power relationships inherent rarely get scrutinized, let alone questioned.

To reduce the world's longest poem to a meaningful three-hour film remotely resembling the original work—assuming this is even possible—a filmmaker has to



Still from *Yaaba* by Idrissa Ouedraogo.

have a deep understanding of it in its original form. The film's P.R. material rambles on about how *The Mahabharata* is about 15 times as long as the Bible, boasts about its antiquity and the place it holds in world literature—it even includes a one-page synopsis. Despite all the effort put into this material to locate the text for Western art critics, what emerges is an epic as seen through Western eyes and experience. There has been no cultural exchange.

This odyssey into the twisted carcass of what was a living book, begins with a series of out of focus shots of what looks like used tin foil. The voice-over launches into a series of super-encapsulized definitions of concepts like Dharma, Karma, and an explanation of the origins of Krishna, an avatar of the Hindu god, Vishnu. (The triad of the main Hindu gods consists of: Brahman, the creator; Vishnu, the preserver; and Shiva, the destroyer. At specific points in time, the gods have come to earth in human or animal form—an avatar.) The explanations that haphazardly tumble out reminded me of the definitions one expects to find in mainstream tomes of Western cultural wisdom like *National Geographic*.

Translating weighty philosophical concepts that most people (e.g., people living in the West) who will see the film have no prior knowledge of whatsoever is quite a responsibility. Unfortunately it is not one that Brook rises to. Instead he falls into a chasm of distortion that he never manages to crawl out of.

He has been there before. In 1985, Brook attempted to stage *The Mahabharata* as a play of approximately 10 hours.

In the film version, the cultural specificity of the epic is removed. Brook has not observed the narrative structure of the original, beating the text into a linear format. The rich tapestry of narratives woven in and out of the original becomes unravelled. To the extent that these sections are included, they become a tangled heap of



Still from *The Mahabharata* by Peter Brook.

disconnected threads that hardly make sense.

Brook has continued a tradition the West is notorious for when staging a work that has its origins in the culture of the Other. Few of the people in positions of power on the production side (let alone actors) are indigenous to the culture that he has taken the text from. Thus the people with the most power in the epic, Krishna and Arjuna, are played by white men.

The resulting message that it's okay for Europeans to colonize indigenous forms and texts, almost as if they were colonizing another territory is disconcerting. Except that this time the territory is not a physical piece of land, but in some ways something that can traumatize a people in a much deeper way. Brook is colonizing a territory of culture, a territory of identity.

Near the close of the film, the two armies are lined up against each other and about to do battle. Arjuna sees his brethren arrayed before him and begins to doubt his decision to wage war upon them. What follows is another discourse in itself called the *Bhagavad Gita*, the primary religious text for Hindus. The *Bhagavad Gita* consists of a lengthy ex-

change between Krishna and Arjuna. In it Krishna passes on all he has learned, all that he believes will help Arjuna arrive at a decision and accept responsibility for it.

In Brook's *Mahabharata* that discourse lasts about two minutes. How can anyone even try to communicate the magnitude of this discourse in two minutes? Needless (or perhaps it is necessary) to say, Brook fails miserably.

Unfortunately the audience at the Rialto Cinema seemed to love it, but ask any one who attended if they now understand what Dharma means, or what Karma means, or who Krishna was and I doubt you will get a meaningful answer.

Since for many Westerners this will be their first—if not their only—exposure to the *Mahabharata*, it is regrettable that the filmmakers chose the easy way out. They have reproduced that cast of old worn-out stereotypes that locate Asian culture as exotic, erotic, strange, mystic and irrational. I am left asking but one question: when will this cultural imperialism and distortion be recognized for what it is? In an enlightened environment Brook's *Mahabharata* would be thrown onto the trash heap where it belongs. ■

Molly Shinhat is a journalist living in Montreal.



# POMP amidst CIRCUMSTANCE

by Michael Shapcott

When cultural expression is rooted in injustice, inequity and gross distortion, some remarkably grotesque images bloom. Consider the cultural centrepiece of the proposed 1996 Toronto Olympic Cultural Festival—a “highly entertaining and memorable look at the Canadian character”:

“... under laser-lighted Northern Lights, a squadron of miners, their hard hats fitted with halogen lamps, will march through drifts of man-made snow to the beat of Inuit drums. The traditional square dance will be turned on its head as huge combine harvesting machines delicately step across the stadium floor. The most advanced special effects will seem to ignite a forest fire in the SkyDome, add a driving wind, thunderous rain and blinding fog—all perfectly safe and immensely original entertainment that owes much to Canada’s challenging climate and vast landscape. The Pageant will not only bring art and commerce together, it will call on the skills and heritage of Canada’s many cultures and regions to join in a common celebration...”

The proposed Olympic pageant brings to mind Summit Square—another crude caricature staged for the exclusive benefit of the international media. The square

swallowed a dusty parking lot in downtown Toronto during the 1988 Economic Summit—the annual gathering of the leading capitalist countries. At the centre of the square, surrounded by huge circus tents, was an artificial pond with a fake island and—believe it or not—an honest-to-goodness, live Canadian beaver chained to a stake. The scheme was conceived and financed by the city’s corporate elite—many of the same folks who are conspiring to bring the ’96 Olympics to town.

The corporate impulse to reduce the many richly textured cultures of Canada to a series of bathetic sideshows arises from a determination to remove these cultures from their political, economic, and social contexts. Not only does corporate culture seek to deny fundamental realities (and fundamental injustices), but it is anxious to put forward a sanitized, everything-is-okay, business-as-usual image. The miners in the Olympic pageant could be situated in the struggles (and victories) of working people—instead, they become cartoon-style cutouts. Native people are even more removed. They are relegated to the background, and expected to provide the drumbeat. The forces of nature—a central reality in this northern

climate—are reduced to a Disneyland spectacle. We clap, we ooohhh and aaahhh, waiting expectantly for the next thrill. Everything is stripped, trimmed and packaged—and then sold back to us as art and culture.

Megaproject mania is sweeping through Toronto. Over the next decade, the corporate sector wants the 1996 Olympics, it wants a new ballet-opera house, and it wants the World’s Fair for the year 2000. All this after the corporate elite built itself a new domed stadium. The SkyDome was built for almost \$600 million (according to the latest estimates), with a roof which, for the first time in the history of human civilization, opens and closes. The people are expected to stand and applaud this marvel of technology and engineering.

The profit motive runs deep through each of these schemes. McDonalds for instance, paid \$5 million to acquire the hamburger monopoly at the SkyDome. Stadium officials estimate that McDonalds will make at least \$408 million from their SkyDome concession over the next decade. Recognition of the potential for huge profits explains why Olympic organizers asked corporations to use their marketing budgets to provide

the funds for the bid to win the games. The Olympics, one of the biggest global marketing schemes, offer multinational corporations the opportunity to make millions by linking their marketing to the Olympic logo. In Toronto, corporations put up approximately half of the estimated \$14.6 million that Olympic boosters will spend in their attempt to win the bid. (The other half comes from public funds.)

However, money isn’t the only motive for corporate involvement. Megaprojects have always had an important role in diverting the people and distorting political realities. The circuses confuse and defuse, taking energy away from important issues. By providing spectacles in the name of entertainment, the corporate community aims to ensure that the world remains a safe place for its activities. Culture, art and sports are central to this process. There’s very little that is new in all this. *Other Places, Other Times*, a text used in Toronto high schools, gives a glimpse of life in the Golden Age of the Roman Empire (from approximately 100 B.C. to 150 A.D.) It reports:

Life for the poor people of [Rome] revolved around “bread and circuses.” One day a month, the emperor’s employees stood at the Gate of Minucius in the city walls, distributing free grain that the poor could make into bread. Many more times a month, poor and rich alike flocked to the Circus Maximus, one of the main Roman arenas, for the games and celebrations that were a feature of Roman life. . . . The Circus Maximus was used for entertainment. Fearful of rebellion, the government tried to keep the people happy by giving them exciting sporting events to watch . . .

First comes a chariot race . . . there will be 11 more races before the day is out. Meanwhile, acrobats tumble into the arena, leaping from horse to horse in frantic motion. Today is dedicated to chariot racing, but tomorrow there will be a battle to the death between slaves and elephants and lions . . . Later in the week, gladiators will fight each other; unless Caesar shows mercy to the loser, only the winner will live, to go on to another fight. . . . Perhaps this week too there will be hippopotamuses splashing in the moat that keeps the wild animals from the spectators. If we get bored with all this, we can wander down to the theatre, where actors present dramatic plays for the crowds. . .



Illustration by Chris Reed.

All very exciting, no doubt about that. The Romans knew how to throw a spectacle. When all’s said and done, the first century’s hippopotami and duelling gladiators certainly beat the heck out of the 20th century’s chained beavers and hot dog vendors. But if the flow of blood is somewhat abated in modern-day circuses, the basic agenda remains the same.

To understand the role culture and art play in the Megaprojects currently on the drawing board for Toronto, it’s important

to understand the political and economic realities of the city and the country. Canada is a profoundly inequitable country. According to Statistics Canada, 10 per cent of the population owns 51.3 per cent of the personal wealth while 20 per cent of Canadians control only a fraction of one per cent. In Toronto, the country’s biggest and richest urban area, the split between rich and poor is growing wider. A 1989 study by the Metro Toronto Social Planning Council reports an increasing



## COLUMN

polarization between the wealthy and the poor in the city.

The most numbing statistics reveal the growing army of hungry people. In a city where every grocery store shelf is bursting with food, between 80,000 and 100,000 people a month are forced to use foodbanks. In 1989 the city's central food bank distributed more in one week than it did during its entire first year of operation in 1984. Over the span of a year, more than 250,000 different people have had to line up at an emergency food programme. More than half of the millions of pounds of food that is distributed to the hungry is corporate refuse—staled bread and dairy products, rotten fruits and vegetables, canned goods (many of them with ominous black X's—"nothing to worry about," the corporate donors assure us), and the like. The quality of some of the food is so bad that the city has had to set up a special foodbank for pregnant women and nursing mothers to ensure that they get dairy products and fresh produce. The numbers of hungry people in Toronto would fill the proposed Olympic stadium—and there would still be enough left over to fill half of the SkyDome.

But this is only the tip of the poverty iceberg. The hunger crisis is rooted in a housing crisis. As many as 20,000 people are homeless in Toronto with another 50,000 on the brink of homelessness. At least 100,000 more households are caught "in the cycle of homelessness," according to a 1988 provincial study. Toronto is a very rich city—but the wealth is not shared equitably. As the wealth of the elite families and corporations continues to grow, the ranks of the poor increase dramatically.

The glossy, hardcover promo book produced by the World's Fair boosters in 1988 is filled with cloying sentimentality. There's no reference to the *real* lives of *real* people, just picture-postcard images of trimmed parks and happy shoppers. One photo shows a sandblasted house with this description: "Rampant

gentrification in Parkdale has made parts of a plain neighbourhood pretty." Talk to the 15,000 or so tenants in South Parkdale, most of them working and low-income people and they'll describe how gentrification has destroyed entire neighbourhoods—not just Parkdale, but Cabagetown, the Annex, South Riverdale, the Beaches, South of Carlton—and the destruction continues. A city planning study estimated that from 1975 to 1985, Toronto suffered a net loss of at least 10,000 housing units—mostly due to gentrification. The destruction of affordable housing is one of the root causes of the city's current housing crisis. There's nothing "pretty" about it.

Working people are also experiencing hardship. The Labour Council of Metro Toronto recently warned that the loss of industrial lands and good-paying industrial jobs is impoverishing working people. As low-paying service sector jobs replace industrial work, driving down workers' wages, the polarization of Toronto into rich and poor is accelerated. Many of the corporations boosting Toronto's Megaproject mania are the direct beneficiaries of this de-industrialization. In the past year alone, they have announced lay-offs of 10,533 workers according to a running tally developed by the Bread Not Circuses Coalition.

The grim statistics run on and on. By denying the inequities and injustices, Megaproject boosters are attempting to paste a happy face over this, but the fundamental reality is that of a divided and profoundly sick city.

The propaganda issued by the Toronto Ontario Olympic Council is full of deceptive bumpf. There is the usual chapter about "Toronto's ethnic diversity" that ignores the racism that pervades the city. Megaproject boosters protest that the recent killings of Black people by police officers in the Metro and Peel regions and homelessness have nothing to do with slick campaigns to bring circuses to town. But that's exactly the point. Their schemes have nothing to do with the real city, yet

they want to divert billions of dollars of public and private resources for empty spectacles. The corporate boosters want the active support of cultural workers, and they are conspiring to make their distorted image the dominant picture. The Megaproject maniacs warn that even if their schemes are derailed few, if any, additional funds will go to the real needs of Torontonians. That's a tragic comment, but probably true, considering the lack of political will to feed and house the people of Toronto, to provide adequate childcare, good-paying jobs, clean and safe neighbourhoods, and a vibrant and active cultural life that is rooted in the lived experiences of the people. But it's no reason to run away and join the circuses. While the city's problems won't be solved by forcing an end to Megaproject mania, an embrace of the spectacular will only move us farther away from solutions.

Consider the proposed ballet-opera house. "What can you say about a country that doesn't create operas, but insists on creating ballet-opera houses," Robert Fulford wrote in 1988. The Canadian Opera Company (COC) is, along with the National Ballet of Canada (NBC), leading the campaign for the new cultural palace. The COC is closely tied to the corporate community, with much of its programme sponsored by some of the biggest businesses in the country. The programme is appropriately tame. Nothing controversial, mainly reruns of the so-called classics (material drawn from other cultures and other times with no connection to Toronto). While there is nothing wrong with reprising the golden oldies, there is something profoundly disturbing about a company that claims to be world-class but is blind to its own city and country. The COC and NBC are unhappy with their current space at the O'Keefe Centre. There's no doubt that the backstage facilities are far from ideal, but neither company is in danger of having to fold their operations. If a new ballet-opera house isn't built, patrons will con-

tinue to view the singing and dancing. The critical issue is one of priorities: does Toronto need another elite cultural facility at this time, a venue that will be used almost exclusively by the NBC and COC? When community-based artists and other cultural workers are almost literally being starved out of Toronto, should hundreds of millions in public funds be dumped into one facility for two companies that already have an acceptable performing space?

The proposed site for the ballet-opera house is approximately six acres of government-owned land in downtown Toronto. Almost from the moment he became Premier of Ontario in 1985, David Peterson has pledged that affordable housing would be the first priority on all surplus government land. But multi-millionaire insurance magnate Hal Jackman—the key businessman behind the ballet-opera house—worked out a deal for the land with Peterson and Toronto Mayor Art Eggleton. Almost half will be given over to the ballet-opera house and adjoining luxury commercial outlets. Two-thirds of the remaining land will be sold to speculators to develop luxury condominiums (with \$65 million from the sale of land handed over to Jackman to help build the \$305 million theatre). Less than 500 units of affordable housing will be built on the site—and they will be tucked out of public view on the side streets.

So elite culture will be staged on land that was originally promised to the people for housing. Ballet-opera house backers have tried to put on moral blinkers, claiming that the housing crisis is not their concern. But it's precisely because opera is a higher political priority than affordable housing that the city's poverty crisis will continue to grow. Jackman and his corporate and political friends want to build a ballet-opera house on the backs of the homeless and under-housed people of Toronto. At one point, ballet-opera house backers offered a sop to the poor. They offered to place video monitors along the

glass walls of the new structure, so that the poor and hungry could huddle in the cold and get a little culture. Their gesture is not only offensive, it misses the point about popular access to culture. The issue is not simply about getting poor people through the doors, but about ensuring that all the people—not just the corporate elite—have some interest and involvement in the art that is practiced on the stage.

As Megaproject mania sweeps over the city, threatening to destroy everything that doesn't join in the boosterish chorus, it becomes imperative to articulate a vision for the city in which art is not removed from life, but grows out of life. A vision in which culture does not pro-

ceed at the expense of justice, but has a moral dimension. Cultural expression is much more than square-dancing combines (proposed for the Toronto Olympic Cultural Festival). Cultural workers have an important role, like the little boy in the fairy tale, to point out that the emperor has no clothes. Toronto's corporate elite shouldn't be allowed to get away with their Megaproject agenda at a time of profound and growing social distress. It's time to fight for bread, not circuses.

**Michael Shapcott is a community development worker at the Toronto Christian Resource Centre and an active member in a number of local, provincial and national anti-poverty coalitions.**

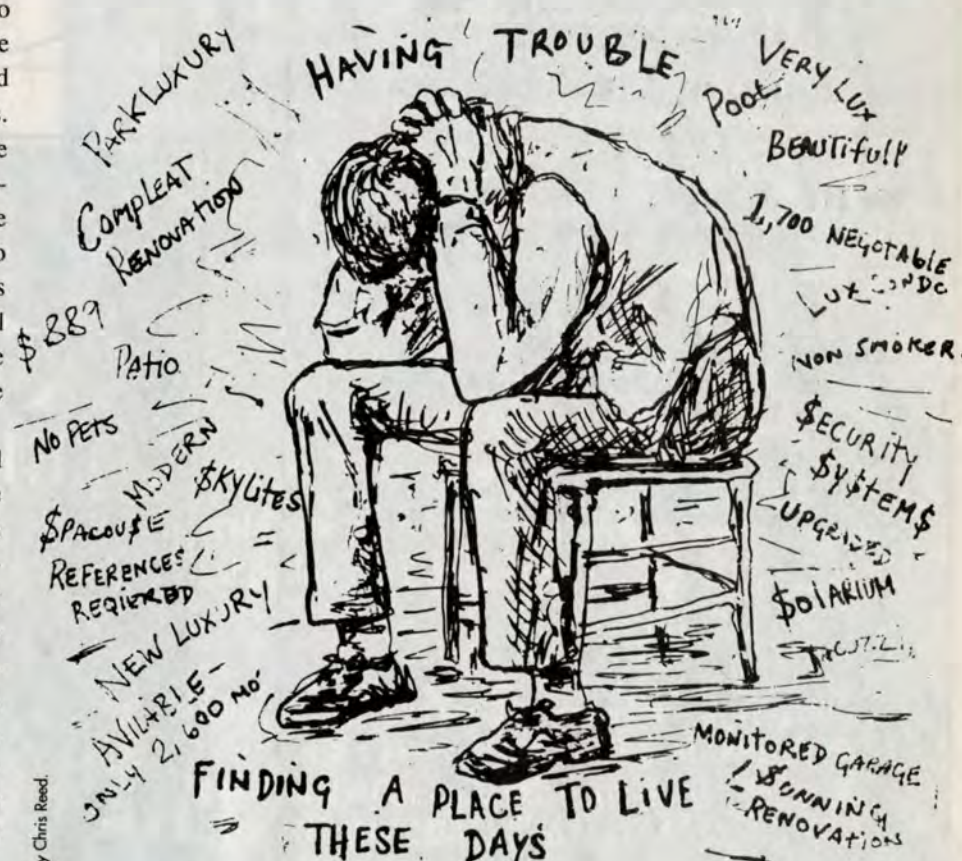


Illustration by Chris Reed.



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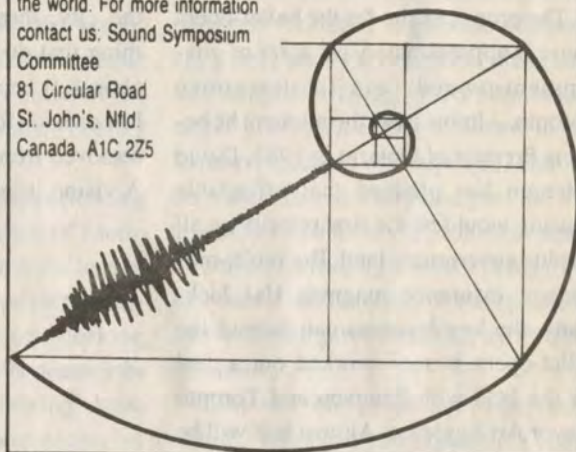
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