

FUSE

MAGAZINE

JUNE • JULY 1990 Vol. XIII No. 5

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black history & desire

molly shinhat
interviews british
filmmaker isaac julien

tv trinidad

by richard fung

**having the
last laugh**

becki ross
on the video of
margaret moores &
almerinda travassos

soviet video art

by nina czegledy

*fearful
symmetry*

Dot Tuer on the
Nicaraguan Elections



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SEPTEMBER 8 - 29, 1990

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SEPTEMBER 1990

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CENTRE DE DOCUMENTATION
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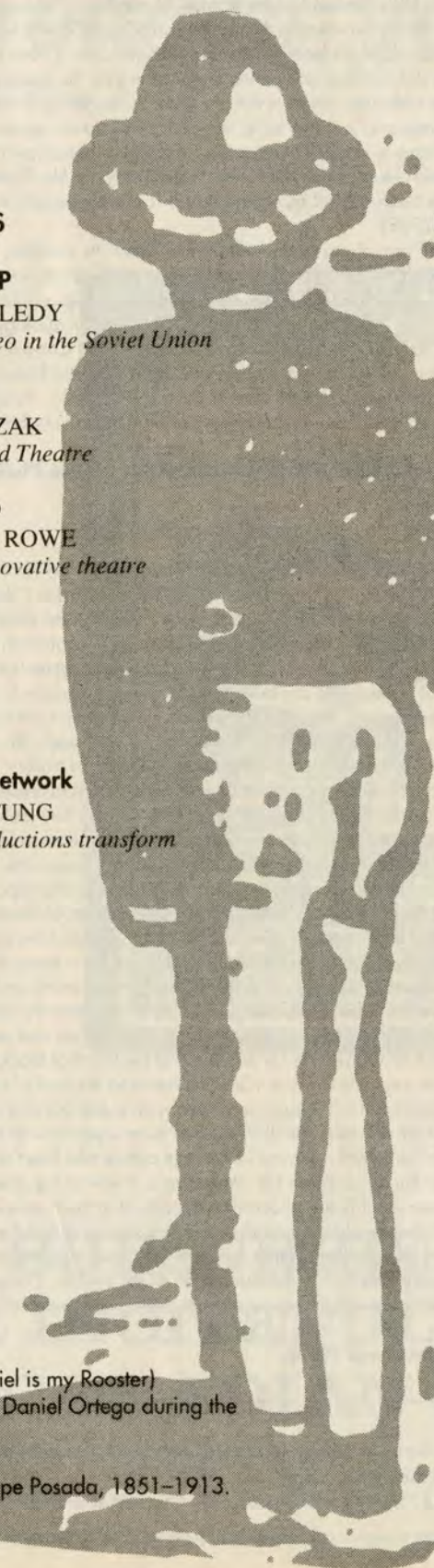
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JUNE•JULY 1990
VOL. XIII No. 5

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letters

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

Dear FUSE:

We continue to be amazed at the number of apologists who are eager to explain away June Callwood's behaviour towards the members of Vision 21 who leafletted the PEN Gala in the fall of 1989. Susan Crean's letter continues the pattern. Ms. Crean is a writer and so, we are sure, understands the nuances and connotations of words. To apologise for one's actions carries a very specific meaning, which is not the same as regretting those same actions. There are any number of reasons, we are sure, why Ms. Callwood regrets her actions, none of which necessarily have to do with her insulting and vulgar behaviour towards the members of Vision 21. We would like to remind Ms. Crean that not only has Ms. Callwood regretted her behaviour, she has also been quoted as saying that it is we who ought to apologise to her (*Macleans*, October 9, 1989).

Vision 21 has always been very clear about its position, and since Ms. Crean seems somewhat confused by what she describes as an impasse, we will reiterate this position. We have always considered June Callwood's behaviour deplorable. We have demanded a public apology from her, she can keep her regrets. Until such an apology is forthcoming Vision 21 does not see any point to meeting with any member of PEN Canada. Vision 21 will continue to do its work in the area of racism and the arts; the Writers in Prison Committee will, we are sure, continue to do its work. We do want to caution Ms. Crean, though, that running with the foxes and hunting with the hounds has always proved to be risky behaviour.

**Brenda Lem, Gillian Morton, Marlene Nourbese Philip
for Vision 21**

Dear FUSE:

Has V.S. Naipaul written a new work, *Abandon the River?* Hazel Da Breo, in her piece on the Royal Ontario Museum's exhibition *Into the Heart of Africa* ("Royal Spoils," *FUSE* XIII No. 3), quoted from this work. Did she, in fact, mean *A Bend In the River*? I would be prepared to give her the benefit of the doubt and treat this as a typographical error, but the piece contains so many factual inaccuracies, such as referring to Elizabeth Parchment as Jean Parchment, that I tend to the belief that these errors are but the result of sloppy research and writing.

I could more easily excuse this type of writing were it not tied to a dangerously insidious argument that reiterates the old "blame the victim" approach. Ms. Da Breo asks, "Who or where are the Black Canadian or Ontarian experts in Black Art History?" and "Who and where are the members of the Black community who go to the museums to present our issues and work towards its democratization?" She concludes that "only roughly two per cent of the patrons are Black." The implication here is that somehow Blacks are at fault for not producing experts in Black Art History and for not going to the museum to present their issues. Ms. Da Breo does nothing to dispel the implication, but goes on to talk about the "shockingly disproportionate number of Black staff" and the fact that there were no figures for the number of Blacks who subscribe to the ROM publication *Rotunda*. She also questions how many Blacks have signed up to go with the museum for field analysis of the Costa Rican rain forests, or for a study of the Royal Museum of Central Africa in Belgium. Really! Ms. Da Breo caps her argument and confirms her position by her statement that "the Black community, or any other community for that matter, will find its voice more effectively heard by organizations it has supported and served."

It is clear that Ms. Da Breo is arguing that the fact that Blacks have not been very involved in the museum explains why the ROM has mounted the kind of racist exhibition it has and why it is being recalcitrant in its refusal to make any changes. It is also clear that Ms. Da Breo believes that it is the fault of Blacks that they are not more involved with the ROM. There is no analysis on her part of the role of museums in Western culture and how the lived reality of Black people's lives fits or, in this case, doesn't fit into that role. A similar argument is often made to explain the poor performance of Black students in schools—that their parents aren't involved enough, not that teachers are derelict in their duties as teachers and that the system is racist.

There are many other similar types of confused arguments in Ms. Da Breo's article; it contributes very little to the debate on the ROM exhibit. I only wish that *FUSE* would have commissioned a more rigorously argued, better written piece on such an important matter.

Marlene Nourbese Philip

Apology

The *FUSE* editorial board apologizes to Steve Reinke for publishing an incorrect version of his review, "Off the Beaten Track." (Vol. XIII No. 4)

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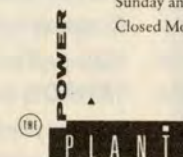
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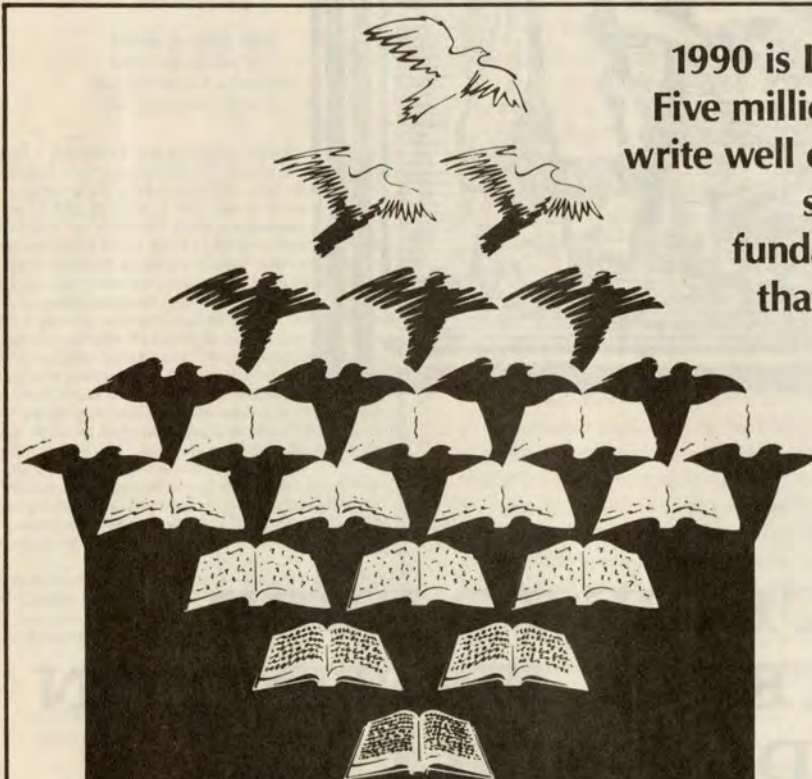
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VIDEO FROM V TAPE

VHS IN THE CCCP

by Nina Czegledy

Soviet underground cinema and video production started in the early 1980s at the low ebb of the Brezhnev era. Moscow and Leningrad are the main centres of the parallel film and video movement. The Muscovites are headed by the Aleinikov brothers in film and Boris Yuhananov in video. Soviet film critic Mikhail Brashinsky notes, "The only thing that unites all the underground filmmakers is that they are, so to speak, all virgins. They set up the avant-garde movement as though nothing had ever been done before, working in 8mm, 16mm and video." Since *perestroika*, however, serious official interest in parallel film and video is endangering the "underground" aspect of the movement. As Brashinsky surmises, "An alternative and independent voice is something Soviet culture needs. Its loss would be painful."

In January 1990, a Soviet avant-garde video and documentary film symposium was held in Budapest. The invited guests, Boris Yuhananov, Tatjana Scserbina and Roman Smirnov came from Moscow to screen their own work as well as videos from the 1989 Leningrad Parallel Film Festival.

On the last evening of their stay in Budapest, Boris, Tatjana and Roman talked to me about political realities, video art and the parallel cine-movement in the U.S.S.R.

ROMAN SMIRNOV AN ACTOR AND THEATRE DIRECTOR, STARTED TO MAKE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL VIDEO DOCUMENTARIES A FEW YEARS AGO.

FUSE: YOU HAVE DOCUMENTARY FOOTAGE FROM ALL OVER THE U.S.S.R. HOW WERE YOU ABLE TO TRAVEL SO MUCH?

SMIRNOV: I used every possible way. I have relatives all over the country and I travelled with the theatre as well. When I started to make documentaries I became familiar with many regions.

FUSE: HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN WORKING IN VIDEO?

SMIRNOV: The last two years.

FUSE: WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO DOCUMENT POLITICAL EVENTS ON VIDEO?

SMIRNOV: It became clear to me that TV reports were lying and I wanted to become part—through this video documentation—of all of these important current events. I have been an actor and theatre director but I always felt confined by the creative limitations of acting. I wanted to do more, to expand, to do everything. I feel video is a new, novel art form that combines numerous features. The maker of video documentaries is similar to the hero participating in a Greek tragedy. Film on the other hand is a different language, it has a

different connection to reality. In video, I don't just frame an event with the camera. I am working with a certain structure. For me the only reality is the role of the open, well-meaning observer. All other viewpoints are artificial.

FUSE: YOU MENTIONED EARLIER THAT AT PRESENT THERE ARE SEVERAL REALITIES IN THE U.S.S.R., COULD YOU EXPAND ON THIS?

SMIRNOV: In Azerbaijan, for example, there is the Muslim reality, the Armenian reality and the official media reality. The official media in the U.S.S.R. tries constantly to create a certain impression, to educate the viewer.

FUSE: DON'T YOU THINK THERE IS A WORLDWIDE MEDIA MANIPULATION REGARDLESS OF CONTINENTS?

SMIRNOV: Maybe. But I have worked for several organizations such as CBS and for directors like Wenders... in any case for me this is a unique life-play. I mainly document events and when I work for others I am not really interested in how it will be edited.

FUSE: IN YOUR TRAVELS THROUGHOUT THE U.S.S.R. YOU HAVE ENCOUNTERED REGIONAL NATIONALISM, CAN YOU TELL ME MORE ABOUT IT?

SMIRNOV: Nationalism is two fold in the U.S.S.R. In the Baltics, for example, it is directed towards ruling their native land. It is a positive nationalism, whereas in Russia it is not so simple. Everybody has a different idea, it is destructive and intended to persecute the other.

FUSE: YOU HAVE SHOT AN ENORMOUS AMOUNT OF DOCUMENTARY MATERIAL. WHAT DO YOU INTEND TO DO WITH IT?

SMIRNOV: First I just want to document everything and then later make a grand documentary. But this is not my only interest. I have worked with video installations and slides.

FUSE: DO YOU INTEND TO DO MORE INSTALLATIONS OR VIDEO DOCUMENTARIES?

SMIRNOV: I just want to continue with everything. My immediate problem is that Tatjana and I have been invited to the U.S. and I don't know if I will have opportunities to continue there. I will take all my slides, graphics and try to do some experimental work in America.

TATJANA SCSEBINA IS A WRITER, ESSAYIST AND POET. SHE IS A PROMINENT FIGURE IN THE NEW CULTURE MOVEMENT, WHICH SHE HELPED FOUND. SCSEBINA HAS BEEN WORKING IN VIDEO OF LATE AND SHE TALKED TO ME ABOUT HER VIDEO WORK.

FUSE: YOU ARE A POET, HOW DID YOU GET INVOLVED WITH VIDEO?

SCSEBINA: I have been working within the framework of the New Culture movement since its beginnings in the early '80s. I am a writer and I also work for Radio Free Europe. I write poems, articles and essays. Boris and I have known each other for a long time. I actually came into contact with video through Boris. I do not plan to work directly in video, but I write for this medium. In the video we made with Roman (my husband), my role was that

of the writer. Although it is a documentary, in my view the conception of how it is presented and the narration is vital. Cuts are made based on my script.

FUSE: ARE YOU PLANNING TO WRITE FOR VIDEO IN THE FUTURE?

SCSEBINA: I wrote a novel which Boris has wanted to make into a video for a long time because it is very video-like. The book was written from a candid-camera point of view, with the title *Stories of a Spy*, or should I say witness? The whole flow of the book has a video character.

FUSE: DO YOU FIND VIDEO MORE IMPERSONAL THAN, FOR EXAMPLE, A POEM?

SCSEBINA: No, I find it more individualistic.

BORIS YUHANANOV IS ONE OF THE PIONEERS OF THE VIDEO MOVEMENT IN THE U.S.S.R. DIRECTOR OF HIS OWN THEATRE GROUP CALLED WORLD THEATRE THEATRE VIDEO, HE IS ALSO TEACHES VIDEO AT THE FREE ACADEMY IN MOSCOW. IN RESPONSE TO HIS IMMEDIATE SURROUNDINGS BORIS CREATED A WORLD OF HIS OWN. IN BUDAPEST HE HAS SHOWN SELECTIONS OF HIS EPIC VIDEO NOVEL *THE CRAZY PRINCE* (1000 CASSETTES IN LENGTH) AS WELL AS A VIDEO ADAPTATION OF HIS PLAY *OCTAVIO*. THE DRAMA IS BASED ON A PLAY ATTRIBUTED TO SENECA SUPERIMPOSED ON TEXT BY LEON TROTSKY. IT PORTRAYS THE FALL OF THE EMPIRE. *OCTAVIO* INCORPORATES ELEMENTS OF SOVIET "AGIT-THEATRE" FROM THE '20S. IT EVOKES THE ART WORLD OF MOSCOW IMPROVISED AS A PARTY-LIKE ATMOSPHERE. WHILE IN REHEARSAL THE PLAY WAS VIDEOTAPE. THE FINAL PRODUCTION THUS BECAME AN INTEGRATION OF VIDEO AND THEATRE. IN BORIS'S OPINION, WHILE LIFE IS OPEN-ENDED, TRADITIONAL THEATRE IS MYSTERIOUS AND WORKS BY SACRED RITUALS. IT IS HIS INTENTION TO FORGE A NEW FORM OF THEATRE FROM THEATRICAL TRADITIONS AND SPONTANEOUS LIFE-LIKE COMPONENTS.

FUSE: HOW DID YOU BEGIN TO MAKE VIDEOS?

YUHANANOV: Before I had a camera I recorded the sounds around me and wrote down in shorthand what I had

seen—thus I became a video camera myself. I lived like this for two years in the countryside and then two more years in the army. I consider these pieces my first videos. Later, when I acquired a camera I called this period, "My head is in my hands." Later, in response to my environment, I created a world of my own. In 1986, I was in a situation where I couldn't perform my plays. I started to record them on video. A magic transformation occurred. The simple recording device became a new creative, artistic direction in my work.

FUSE: WHEN DID INDEPENDENT VIDEO PRODUCTION START IN THE SOVIET UNION?

YUHANANOV: In the '80s. There was no available technology before this. The first cameras were brought in by people with money, or connections. In the beginning anyone with a camera was suspected of being a spy or working for the KGB. Ignorance was such that people on the street mixed up still cameras with video cameras. Being unaware of the sound component of video, they talked freely. Naturally, this had some advantages.

FUSE: IN YOUR OPINION, HOW DOES SOVIET VIDEO DIFFER FROM VIDEO WORK FROM WESTERN COUNTRIES?

YUHANANOV: Poverty is the only factor that makes a difference.

FUSE: HOW DID YOU OVERCOME THAT AND WOULD YOU SAY THERE IS SOMETHING THAT DISTINGUISHES SOVIET VIDEO ART?

YUHANANOV: We observe our surroundings closely and carefully choose topics where advanced technology is of no major importance.

FUSE: ARE THERE ANY OFFICIAL OR "PARALLEL" VIDEO ORGANIZATIONS?

YUHANANOV: Most people work independently, although some organizations have emerged lately. An or-



ganization of independent video producers was founded at the Leningrad Film Festival in April 1989. This is a parallel movement to the official organization of TV Video Producers.

FUSE: ARE THERE ANY VIDEO CO-OPS IN THE U.S.S.R.?

YUHANANOV: Yes. These are mostly amateur clubs or co-ops. Productions include family events, weddings, etc.

FUSE: DO VIDEO ARTISTS WORK IN THESE CO-OPS?

YUHANANOV: Seldom. But I have sometimes taped funerals or weddings in order to gain access to equipment.

FUSE: ARE THESE CO-OPS STATE SUPPORTED?

YUHANANOV: No, the co-ops are self-supporting. Artists can borrow or rent co-op equipment, or work for some official production and keep footage for themselves. There is no official support for video art.

FUSE: HOW DID YOU GET ACCESS TO EQUIPMENT?

YUHANANOV: I know several painters who are interested in working with video. These people sell their paintings abroad for foreign currency and then buy equipment for themselves. For myself, I try to approach rich people and get them interested in my video or film ideas.

FUSE: HOW IS EDITING AND POST-PRODUCTION DONE IN THE U.S.S.R.?

YUHANANOV: At home, from VHS to VHS or Video 8 transferred to VHS. Last year I developed an in-camera edit method I call "fatal" or "deadly" editing. This consists of carefully inserting or taping over and over existing bits of video footage.

FUSE: IS THERE ANY DISTRIBUTION OF ART TAPES?

YUHANANOV: There is a lot of interest—and distribution is starting now, there seems to be new possibilities.

FUSE: AND WHERE ARE VIDEOS SCREENED?

YUHANANOV: Festivals. The first was

in Kaliningrad in May 1989. Then at art exhibitions. Independent film and video makers are organizing an international event for 1991.

FUSE: WHAT IS THE BACKGROUND OF THESE VIDEO ARTISTS?

YUHANANOV: They come from everywhere.

FUSE: TELL ME ABOUT VIDEO EDUCATION IN THE U.S.S.R.

YUHANANOV: Since September 1989 a course in video production has been offered at the Moscow Film Academy. The Independent Academy, which is an alternative institution, has been teaching video since 1988. The Independent Academy was founded as part of the New Culture movement. Parallel movie directors teach there. There is a campus in Moscow and one in Leningrad. I am the director of the video department in Moscow. We intend to offer courses in documentary-making, which Roman will direct.

FUSE: HOW LONG IS THE VIDEO COURSE?

YUHANANOV: Three years. In addition to video production techniques, the students have to learn about theatre directing, film theory and film directing. They have to be able to work with a 16mm camera, and they have to work with actors.

FUSE: WHO ATTENDS THE SCHOOL?

YUHANANOV: Mostly young people. There is an entrance exam.

FUSE: HOW MANY PEOPLE APPLY AND HOW MANY ARE ACCEPTED?

YUHANANOV: This year about 300 applied and 40 were accepted.

FUSE: BESIDES THE INSTITUTIONS YOU HAVE MENTIONED ARE THERE ANY OTHER SCHOOLS IN THE U.S.S.R. WHERE VIDEO INSTRUCTION IS OFFERED?

YUHANANOV: Not yet. Hopefully in the near future.

FUSE: ARE THERE ANY PUBLICATIONS DEALING WITH VIDEO ART IN THE U.S.S.R.?

YUHANANOV: Two months ago the first video digest was published with the title *Argus*. Cine Phantom, the first independent film and video journal, has had a video section since 1985. It publishes translated articles from journals from abroad and also critical writings. I edit the video section. This journal is central to the parallel film movement. The first independent film festival was organized in Moscow in 1987. It was called Cine Phantom Fest and it was followed by The Leningrad Festival in 1989. The next one is planned for 1991. It will be an international event and international video artists will be invited.

FUSE: HOW ARE WOMEN REPRESENTED IN VIDEO PRODUCTION?

YUHANANOV: Women have now started to work in video and I have female pupils at the Free Academy. At the Leningrad campus six out of 15 students are women.

FUSE: IS THERE ANY WORK PRODUCED CONCERNING WOMEN'S ISSUES?

YUHANANOV: Not that I know.

FUSE: ANY OTHER ISSUES, FOR EXAMPLE, HOMOSEXUALITY?

YUHANANOV: One whole issue of *Cine Phantom* was devoted to homosexuality in film. I have been very interested in this issue and have made a video portrait of a poet whose art was strongly connected to his homosexuality.

FUSE: ETHNIC ISSUES?

YUHANANOV: Yes. A lot of work deals with this, especially now regarding Armenia.

FUSE: TELL ME ABOUT THE INTERACTIONS BETWEEN THE THEATRE AND VIDEO COMMUNITIES.

YUHANANOV: There is a very strong connection. My group, for example, is called World Theatre Theatre Video.

Actors are strongly involved with video art productions.

FUSE: ARE THERE ANY VIDEO INSTALLATIONS?

YUHANANOV: Yes, but very limited because of the lack available technology. I think there is something very specific to Soviet video art which I would like to mention. This is "video mail-art." For example, a friend of mine tapes some interesting material, sends it to me and I tape something over parts of it, send it back for further taping and so on.

FUSE: WHAT CONNECTIONS DO YOU HAVE WITH VIDEO ARTISTS FROM OTHER COUNTRIES?

YUHANANOV: It is limited. I have been to Glasgow, Frankfurt and Berlin, and on my travels I try to meet as many people and see as much work as possible.

FUSE: WHAT ARE YOUR PLANS AND HOPES FOR YOURSELF, AND OTHER VIDEO ARTISTS IN THE U.S.S.R.?

YUHANANOV: I would like to see young video artists from Moscow and Leningrad going to work for a few months abroad. Presently only professors and people of importance receive information—and this information never reaches young people. Young artists are mobile, flexible and would disseminate information among themselves. This would be of great value. For me this is more important than travelling myself, but I am willing to coordinate if an institution or foundation would support such invitations. ■

Nina Czegledy is a Toronto-based video artist and curator of international video art exchange programmes.



by Kim Tomczak



While Toronto may boast the largest film-going audience in Canada (and the third largest in North America, after New York and Los Angeles), we have only one venue dedicated to showing independent and community based film and video. The Euclid, a 200-seat theatre built in a refurbished school, has been operating for just under a year. Although the theatre certainly owes something to forebears such as the Funnel (a now defunct independent experimental film venue), it is Toronto's first facility to feature not only high quality film projection (both 16 and 35mm) but also state of the art video projection. But what distinguishes The Euclid from any past or current Canadian venue is its on-going commitment to voices from marginalized communities—Black, Asian, feminist, lesbian, gay and other traditionally un(d)errepresented groups. Recognizing the important cultural work being done in, and by, these communities, The Euclid has not only devoted specific evenings for such programming but dedicated entire weeks to festivals

and retrospectives. Moreover, The Euclid has involved artists from a wide variety of cultural communities in all levels of the organization from its staff to its programming committee. From the beginning, the programming has been challenging, varied and nothing short of a model for independent theatres across the country. For independent film and video artists, it's a dream come true.

For so long artists have had to beat their heads against the wall of a U.S.-controlled theatrical scene that they have begun to think it "normal" to have over 90 per cent of screen time devoted to foreign film. Even in its short history, The Euclid has managed to create a break in the oppressive and sinister silencing of independent film and video expression in this country. Audiences have responded and attendance at The Euclid's screenings and events continues to increase. A quick survey over the past two or three months reveals these programmes: Asian Cine Vision: A Festival of Asian Cinema; A Celebration of the German Documentary as a Hybrid Form; An

Evening of Innovative Canadian Women's Cinema; Desh Pardesh: a Festival of South Asian Culture in the Diaspora; The Films of Paul Robeson—a retrospective; V is for Video (the Ontario College of Art's survey of student tapes from across Canada); and Queer Culture, a festival of gay and lesbian film and video. Upcoming events include the Independent Film and Video Alliance Showcase which includes work from 50 artist-run centres from across Canada and Images 90, an important national festival of independent video and film. Canadian filmmakers and video artists from diverse communities have remained the focus for the majority of the programming. Besides these screenings, The Euclid has been a place where independent groups such as the Pleasure Dome and the 23rd Room have presented their programmes. It has also been the site of public discussions (such as a recent sold-out lecture by bell hooks), poetry readings, lectures and seminars. More than just a theatre, The Euclid has become an important cul-

tural space where many communities can come together.

In spite of these accomplishments, and I have only touched upon a few, all is not well with the Euclid Theatre. Major construction debts and chronic staffing shortages have resulted in a financial crisis. The Euclid, in existence for only 10 months now, needs more time to establish itself. Recently, after holding a public meeting to discuss these matters, a fundraising committee was struck. Among other things, they are looking for on-going financial support from both government agencies and private sponsors. They have also initiated a membership drive with local audiences. Independent filmmakers, video artists, community groups and *FUSE* readers can also help by writing letters of support so The Euclid can effectively lobby groups and agencies for the funding they so deservedly need. Send your letters of support to:

Let's Not Loose The Euclid, 394 Euclid Ave., Toronto, Ontario, M6G 2S9. ■

Rueful Rhubarb

by J. Spencer Rowe

The night I went to see the first of a week of plays and playlets at the Rhubarb Festival was indeed a cold one. The warmth of the Annex Theatre, where the festival was held, proved to be a welcome relief from the elements.

When I had finished seeing what the first week of shows had to offer me I went home. As it was getting rather late I found myself promptly falling asleep in the arms of my boyfriend, James. He told me that I had slept with a smile on my face. Could it be that I was still blissfully dreaming about what I had seen at the theatre just mere hours ago? Well, not really. I was having a dream about something much more interesting, Greta Garbo.

In my dream, Garbo had gone to visit a friend of mine in the hospital, I was standing just outside his room in the corridor. Garbo then came out of my friend's room and I had just about lost consciousness. I mean, we are talking about Garbo here! Anyway, she seemed to know the effect she had on people. She looked at me and said, "How sweet, thank you, goodbye." At this point she just walked away, and well, one just doesn't run after Garbo, you know what I mean? This I suppose was the reason for my smile while in a state of slumber.

If I were to smile about Rhubarb, it would be while thinking about the opportunities it gives young actors and

writers to perform new works before an audience. The number of young faces I saw over a period of three weeks told me that the spirit of Rhubarb is still strong. This is vitally important if we are to continue to have a strong cultural community imbedded with variety and talent. Sky Gilbert, the artistic director of Buddies in Bad Times, and his assistant Eddie Roy choose the pieces that are shown at Rhubarb. If called upon, they also help newer actors and writers by guiding them to bring out their work. This is very valuable for some of the participants, whose Rhubarb experience is their first.

The festival contained a great deal of work that was more celebratory and entertaining than thought-provoking or challenging. However, Rhubarb cannot be viewed as finished theatre: That is not what Rhubarb is about. It is a unique opportunity for audiences, writers and actors to pick each other's brains and emotions in a way that a simple reading could not accomplish.

Strip presented in the first week of the three week festival starred Andrew Binks as a stripper. Andrew is all blonde hair and youth and had no difficulty in convincing the audience that he could be a stripper. He began by sharing with us what it was like to be a stripper. Along with his engaging tale, he gave us a textbook lesson on how to strip.

During this routine, he removed his clothes piece by piece in the most seductive manner. At this point the script goes a little "off." The writer of *Strip*, Elliott Hayes, allows the tale to turn tragic. The stripper begins to tell us that he was raped and how he was bleeding everywhere (and I do mean everywhere) because of the rape. Finally, the stripper, challenging the audience's complacency, makes us question the way in which we watched and admired his body.

During the second week some of the pieces touched upon socially relevant topics. Of these, *Lies of the Vampire*, an Incubus production starring veteran actor Greg Kramer was, more or less, a metaphorical piece on AIDS.

Another piece that stood out was *Enemas in Toyland*, a sometimes funny and sometimes gut-wrenching experience written and performed

by Peter Lynch. It presented the issues of elder abuse and child abuse, as well as one horrific tale of living in a box.

Of the 20 works shown this year, the funniest and most entertaining at the festival had to be *I'd Kiss You But...*, written and performed by Diane Flacks, Victoria Ward and Wendy White—or as they like to call themselves, Empress Productions. While very entertaining, they presented issues of gender role identification and sexuality, all the while deconstructing stereotypical relationships and situations. They did, without a doubt, leave the audience laughing, but they also left the audience thinking.

Once again, Buddies in Bad Times' Rhubarb Festival gave us questions and beginnings. ■

J. Spencer Rowe is a performance artist and writer living in Toronto.

Greg Kramer in *Lies of the Vampire*.

%&snipxsnip#@*!!

short fuse

1%?

-44%!

The Quebecois arts community is upset with recent remarks made by Lucienne Robillard, Quebec Minister of Cultural Affairs, regarding the State's relationship to the arts. Robillard stated that "the arts rested on a tradition of state patronage and support that has made one forget their strength and influence in the economic sector" adding that the department was commissioning an independent consulting firm to look into "avenues of financing that the government might examine in addition to, or instead of, existing formulas" that would end "the vicious circle of dependence towards the state." To the arts community, Robillard's statements made the arts appear as wards of the state rather than an investment in Quebec's future. They also pointed to the fact that the Bourassa government has failed to live up to its promise of dedicating one per cent of the budget to culture (they currently spend .75). Robillard has reaffirmed that the one per cent figure promised in 1985 would be reached within two or three years.

The Secretary of State's Native Communications Program which finances aboriginal newspapers and broadcasting across the country will be wiped out by the elimination of its entire \$3.4-million budget. In 1986, the federal government had the program evaluated by an independent consulting firm. The report was so positive that, in 1987, the government declared the program "permanent." The program had been crucial in setting up and maintaining a network of information for Native people across Canada, often living in communities isolated from one another.

The cuts are grossly disproportionate. The total annual budget of the Secretary of State is \$3.5-million, from which Mr. Wilson has cut \$2.3-million. Native programs account for less than 2 per cent of the department's budget and yet they have taken 44 percent of the cuts.

(The Globe and Mail)

- \$400,000.

Since the \$1.6-million cut from the Secretary of State's women's programme in the last federal budget, at least a dozen women's centres across the country have been on the verge of closing.

In early May, in an about-face, the government decided to restore \$1.2-million in operational funds to the centres—but only for one year. The \$400,000 in grants for women's publications and national lobby groups that was cut in the last federal budget was not restored.

(Toronto Star & The Globe and Mail)



Archbishop Desmond Belafonte?

In Hollywood's bid to keep up with the world stage, Bill Cosby is slated to produce a mini-series on Nelson Mandela. Top choice for the lead role is Sidney Poitier with other roles reportedly being offered to Jane Fonda and Marlon Brando. Harry Belafonte is to appear in a cameo as Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

Meanwhile, Jane Fonda recently flew to Czechoslovakia to discuss doing a major motion picture about new Czech president Vaclav Havel. Fonda would like to portray Havel's wife, Olga.

(The Toronto Star)



Soul Mates

"The fact remains that there are images which cannot and must not be shown by a public art museum, if it is to maintain its commitment to civilization, and to cultivation of the mind and the responding heart. Indeed, that commitment is embodied most strongly (but invisibly from the public's standpoint) in the act of refusing to host exhibitions which poison the fields of intelligence and cultivated imagination that museums are pledged to tend"

—John Bentley Mays
on Robert Mapplethorpe
("Strong Poison," The Globe and Mail)

"There is a grassroots feeling across Canada about the cultural institutions and what they should be doing, and I think I represent that broad mass of people"

—Felix Holtmann, Chairman of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Communication and Culture (The Globe and Mail)

breaking the network grassroots images transform trinidadian tv

by Richard Fung



It is 1962, the year of independence from Britain. My father brings home a cardboard box marked "Admiral." Out of it he produces a large metal cube with legs and a greyish, glass front. I know what a television is because my older sister, who has been to New York, brags about all the things she has seen there. My father mounts the thing in a corner of the upstairs porch that we use as a living room and we turn it on. There is only an hour's worth of programming a day. But for the first few weeks we turn on the TV (the word is sweet with progress and sophistication) and simply watch the test pattern—a circle of black and white lines with the letters TTT written in the middle. The newspapers tell us this stands for Trinidad and Tobago Television.

Over my adolescence the hours of programming increase, from late afternoon until 10 at night. Throughout these years, my sister and I ritually measure out equal glasses from a single bottle of Coke during station breaks. We rush back upstairs to watch *I Dream of Genie*, *Bewitched* or *The Beverly Hillbillies* on Sundays, *Mr. Ed* on Fridays and *The Lucy Show* mid-week. My mother's favourites are *Bonanza*, *Peyton Place* and most of all, wrestling, during which she jumps up and down shouting, "Hit him! Beat him!"

In the late '60s we spend school recess discussing the politics of Black Power. There are demonstrations in the streets of Port of Spain and Trinidad-born Stokely Carmichael is making news up north. But in the evenings, when my Black classmates are down at Woodford Square being a part of it all, I stay at home and console myself with watching *Star Trek* or *The Avengers*. For a protected, middle class, Chinese kid, whose parents work all the time, television is all there is to do.

It was only the surprise of Canadians that I grew up with the very same television characters as they did, that clued me into that fact that media at home was perhaps not all it should have been. There were local shows in those years: the news, low budget studio productions about cooking, the odd discussion on current affairs and of course, the talent shows. But these could never match the slickness of the imports and they seemed embarrassingly inferior.

The last time I went home to Trinidad was for the Carnival of 1980. It was the end of the oil boom. The centre of the city had been destroyed by mysterious fires. In the ruins of the old department stores "drag brothers" had set up stalls selling handicrafts. The middle class now did their shopping in the new American-style

malls that grew up in the suburbs. The wealthier made regular pilgrimages to Caracas or Miami for their vital supplies. Most food was imported and incredibly expensive. Pizza and fried chicken chains had been introduced and there was even a calypso that year about the looming extinction of the local cuisine. It felt as if North American culture was on a bulldozing joy ride right through the country. I thought I was witnessing the destruction of all I had grown up with as a child. I didn't even bother to watch television, it seemed such a depressing prospect.

Over the last decade, the stories Trinidadian emigrants have told are of the growing unemployment and attendant violence, the food shortages and embargoes, the manifestation of racial conflict between Africans and Indians and the destruction of the early hope that the new N.A.R. (National Alliance for Reconstruction) government would be better than the previous P.N.M. (Peoples National Movement) government, with its rampant corruption. When I returned this year I was, to say the least, apprehensive. What I found was a pleasant surprise. It is hard to say how much the generosity of my vision had to do with a comparison to the dire conditions in continental Latin America that I had come



Banyan Productions: Koo Nimo and Lancelot Layne playing the Tamboo Bamboo.

to know in the intervening years. But I was struck by the comparative wealth that is still apparent.

All is by no means well. Over Christmas, the government announced the lay-off of 450 bus workers. Villagers in Tobago tell us this means their children will not be going to school. The measure is part of the austerity programmes forced on countries all over the world to pay off the national debt and satisfy the International Monetary Fund. What I do find hopeful though is that "development" did not move in the one linear thrust I had earlier feared. So while much of the middle class still complains about the lack of familiar imported foodstuffs like raisins and nuts, Trinidadians are being forced to discover their own richness. Whereas my family proudly ate strawberry Jello for dessert (I never saw a real strawberry until I left Trinidad and was shocked that it wasn't sugary like the sweets I had associated it with), shops are springing up all over the island, selling excellent homemade ices from local coconut, sour-sop and guava. Vegetables are being grown commercially and are abundant at roadside stalls. There seems to be a full scale revival of national culture. On the radio there is new "parang," the Spanish songs traditionally sung at Christmas.

The fashionable sport locally made tie-dye and batik.

Sometimes this growing consciousness comes from peculiar places. Some friends tell me that it took a flower arrangement of balisier in Alexis's apartment on *Dallas* to make Trinidadian florists see that the indigenous flower was worth working with. In a country of abundant orchids and spectacular lilies, the flower of status had been the imported chrysanthemum.

On television, a scan of the week's programming still reveals a strong American bias. First of all, C.N.N. is beamed in live and unadulterated for much of the morning. During the U.S. invasion of Panama, the Turner Broadcasting station carried interviews only with U.S. personnel and the only fatalities tallied were those of American soldiers. Yet many Trinidadians turn to C.N.N., in the belief that they are receiving a "truer" picture of world events than they would get on TTT's evening news. In prime time there is *McGyver*, *The Cosby's*, *NBA Basketball* and *Wheel of Fortune*, along with North American flops sold to the station as a package with the hits. Most popular of all is *The Young and the Restless*. I am told that this is the one thing that all Trinidadians have to talk about.

In the midst of these high budget imports are the few local shows. There is the soap, *Calabash Alley*, and the news, of course. But most of the programmes are still low budget talk shows, religious programmes and talent nights. For five years until January 1990, there was also a half-hour cultural magazine show called *Gayelle*.

A "gayelle" is a cock fighting pit. The name denotes a centre of attention, but also has a strong suggestion of roots and national pride. The intention of the show, according to coordinator Christopher Laird, was "to bring out the positive things that people all over the country were doing that nobody knew about. We wanted to give people pride in their country and provide some idea of what their possibilities were. If you remain ignorant of these things you feel isolated and depressed."

With this mandate, *Gayelle* brought alive many aspects of the country's past and present, taking creative new perspectives on familiar themes. There is a feature on sexism in Calypso and the retaliation of the new female practitioners. There is an experimental drama, a discussion between the two great labour leaders of the 1930s, Uriah Butler and Arthur Cipriani. As Laird observes, "*Gayelle* presented an idea of what television in

Trinidad should be. Within that half-hour we were doing what we feel should be on television all day long."

Gayelle was the latest series produced by Banyan Productions, which in addition to Laird, includes producers Tony Hall and Bruce Paddington. Laird and Paddington met while at university in England, and Hall, who studied drama at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, joined the group later. Banyan grew out of a 1974 workshop organized by UNESCO, The University of the West Indies and TTT. Its aim was to raise the quality of local production through training in writing, directing and performing. Participants were chosen from existing theatre groups and organized into four production units. Even though initially involved, TTT would have nothing to do with the workshops once organized. According to Laird, the group's members were seen as "pot-smoking, communist, semi-intellectuals." This rejection by the country's only television station and the difficulty in obtaining other financing led to the dissolution of three of the production units and Banyan remains as the only survivor from that initial process.

Australian producer Alan Kendall, who led the workshop, was crucial in instilling what Laird calls an "ideology" of television in the participants. Kendall stressed properties specific to the medium, such as live capability. "He felt that for a person to succeed on television they had to be believable. Not that you had to believe what they were saying, but that they were genuine as a person." Many of the exercises, therefore, concentrated on straight to camera presentations, attempting to develop a projection of the self through the camera. "This struck a chord with a lot of us, wanting to bring our own culture right through the lens." The episodes of *Gayelle* that I have seen are exceptionally successful at doing just that.

Television is incredibly popular and influential in Trinidad. With only one station (a second channel broadcasts on weekends), the same programmes are seen by virtually everyone and, consequently, are much discussed. *Gayelle*

has managed to capitalize on this to give a legitimate voice to grassroots culture.

The programme is heavily informed by a sophisticated, social consciousness—that "ideology" that Laird constantly refers to. Among other things, this can be seen most clearly in its handling of race. Tobago is almost totally African. But Trinidad is the most racially mixed of all the Caribbean countries. Indians are in a slight majority. The last census, in 1981, showed Africans with a slight majority. But with established birthrates, it is generally accepted that Indians now constitute the largest single group. They and the Africans each comprise over 40 per cent of the population. Portuguese and Chinese, like the Indians, were first brought in as indentured labourers to replace the emancipated slaves. There are also Syrians and Lebanese who settled as traders, the remnants of French and British colonials, a longstanding population of Spanish speakers and a minuscule community tracing descent to the original Caribs. A large percentage of the population is of mixed heritage. The British, as in other parts of the empire, preserved their power by perfecting a racial hierarchy, which, among other things, played off the two major ethnic groups against each other. Echoes of this tension still ring through contemporary social and political life. The urban population is largely African, while Indians live mostly in the central and southern agricultural areas. Despite grassroots attempts at linking the long term and class interests of both groups, politics tend to fall back on racial lines, with predominantly African parties holding sway since independence in 1962.

When I was a child, there were two cultural programmes: *Scouting for Talent* featuring mainly "Creole" contestants and *Mastana Bahar* showcasing Indian music and dance. Banyan attempts to avoid traditional cultural ghettoization and *Gayelle* was the first programme on TTT hosted by both Indian and African presenters. This, according to Laird, led to a number of problems. "For the first time, we were trying to give East Indians a representative portion of time on the show. They are 40 percent of the population and we tried to allot half the show to

them. But it wasn't that easy. Indians had been used to being locked out and doing their own thing. So whereas African, Creole and urban people came to us with their stuff, Indians didn't. The Africans would accuse us of being too Indian and the Indians would accuse us of tokenism. Bruce, Tony and I see the culture as a whole. It was obvious to us that we had to have that racial mix. It's after all an old cliché about what it means to be Trinidadian. But trying to do that on television seems to be such a hard thing. You have to have that ideology and push it or else it's never going to happen."

Some of the shows have explicit social content, for example, the special on AIDS. The specific message of the show is sometimes problematic: its adoption of the government slogan "stick with one partner or else use a condom" owes more to a moral agenda than any effective AIDS prevention strategy. In a country with one of the highest incidences of AIDS in the hemisphere, the show unfortunately takes—almost exclusively—the point of view of the uninfected, leaving issues of treatment and care largely untouched. These shortcomings reflect the discourse on AIDS among the country's public health professionals. The show makes an invaluable contribution, providing information in a thoughtful, sensitive manner, rather than the hysterical, homophobic hype of even Trinidad's mainstream press.

Most *Gayelle* programmes have a set formula of three segments plus a "Sprangalang Quiz" and a "What's On" at the end. The subject of the quiz is what we used to call civics in my primary school days: national history, geography and culture. It is hosted by the theatrical Dennis Hall projecting in an exaggerated Creole. Language, in fact, has continuously been one of the most controversial aspects of the show. Whereas announcers on radio and television uniformly flaunt their British or American inflected accents, Banyan has sought to represent the vernacular by what Laird describes as "flexible use of language to suit the context." Hall's character is reminiscent of the Canadian "hoser" routine without the patronizing intent. From early on the use

of Creole caused complaints to the station and letters to the editor, both from the expected middle class establishment, as well as from "surprising quarters in the intellectual community." Some complain that the use of Creole by college graduates is unauthentic and condescending. But the hysterical tone of the criticism suggests that Creole is profoundly disturbing to the image many middle class Trinidadians have of themselves. It is perhaps an unwelcome reminder that the island sits in the effluence of the Orinoco delta and is not the extension of the Florida peninsula as they would prefer to imagine.

The issue of language also led to one of Banyan's several brushes with censorship from the state-owned television station. In response to the language controversy, the programme featured a number of "vox pops"—on the street interviews. TTT saw this as oblique criticism of its policies and banned the programme from making comments about the show in the show.

Over the years, the reasoning behind censorship has been equally arbitrary. When asked about recourse, Laird answers a short "no." There are simply no other options for programming. Right from 1976, with the original series titled *Banyan*, the group was banned not for content of the show itself, but because some members had been associated with an award winning high school play that had been seen as supportive of the opposition.

In some ways, it is a miracle that Banyan has survived at all. The group has never received operational funding of any kind. Rather, it has subsisted (sometimes barely) through freelancing and a few commissions from international organizations such as the International Planned Parenthood Federation, which funded the immensely popular social issue soap *Who the Cap Fits*. Taped episodes, accompanied by user guides, are still used in the high school social science curriculum. The scenarios touch on universal topics like teen suicide, child-parent relationships and interracial dating but with a definitively Trinidadian context. *Who the Cap Fits*, like much of



Tony Hall, Errol Sitabal and Maurice Booth in *Gayelle Labour Day Special*.

Banyan's work, succeeds because of its ability to capture little represented truths about local reality.

Banyan has also led in fostering regional consciousness through training stints in other Eastern Caribbean countries. It has included these items as segments in *Gayelle* and later through a UNESCO funded show, *Caribbean Visions*. This programme is now superseded by *Carib Scope*, produced by the Caribbean Broadcast Union and the relatively new Caribbean News Network. Banyan is now in the midst of editing a 13-part documentary series on the Caribbean. It is hard to overemphasize the significance of the regional networking. Trinidadians usually know much more about what is going on in Toronto, New York or London, than in islands a couple of hundred kilometres away. Even Tobago, the sister island, is mostly overlooked by the national media.

Gayelle had its last screening as the decade ended. According to Laird, part of the reason is that the income from TTT could not sustain either of the three principal producers on the show. They had therefore given it over to a younger generation and were not satisfied with the results.

Gayelle is to be replaced by a talk show, *Late Night Lime* ("liming" means to hang out). On the day of the taping, Tony Hall, the show's host, is stuck in Tobago and cannot get a flight in because of the holiday rush. The show should have been taped an hour ago. As I come out of the interview with Christopher Laird, Daisy Voisin, the veteran Queen of Parang and one of the show's guests, has begun to sing in the lobby. She is accompanied on the four stringed guitar called a "cuatro" and the people around her are also singing. Earlier, Laird had half complained that Banyan did not operate enough like a business, too much like a workshop. Trying not to be romantic, I can't help thinking that it is precisely this informality, this ability to absorb new talent and to remain connected with the people, that makes Banyan's work so exciting. ■

Richard Fung is a Toronto-based video producer.



★★★

FEARFUL SYMMETRY

NICARAGUAN

SELF-DETERMINATION & AMERICAN RHETORIC

BY DOT TUER

IN THE EARLY MORNING HOURS OF FEBRUARY 26, 1990 when 30 per cent of the counted votes indicated a firm lead for the National Opposition Union (UNO), a fragile coalition of 12 parties ranging from the extreme right to the rigid left, no celebrations erupted, no fiestas or shouts of jubilation broke the eerie silence. It was as if overnight Managua (the capital city of Nicaragua) had become a ghost town, a shroud of mourning descending upon the city streets. At the Bambana, a nightclub hastily converted into the UNO press headquarters in the week preceding the election, incumbent Violeta Barrios de Chamorro was telling jostling international reporters and a straggle of supporters that today in Nicaragua "there are no winners and no losers" but rather a victory for all of the Nicaraguan people.



WO blocks away in a convention centre dedicated to the memory of assassinated Swedish Prime Minister Olaf Palme, Daniel Ortega was delivering his concession speech to a room full of bleary-eyed journalists and tearful campaign workers. In his televised speech to the nation, Ortega announced that independent of the election outcome, the Sandinistas stood proud and victorious before the people of the world: proud to have contributed a little dignity, social justice and democracy to an unjust world divided between the weak and the strong; victorious in the fulfilment of an electoral process that had been internationally recognized as "free and fair."

Ortega's words were resonant with history, words cognizant of the realities that have confronted the Nicaraguan people since the FSLN (Sandinista National Liberation Front) vindicated the memory of Sandino on July 19, 1979 by overthrowing the U.S.-backed Somoza dictatorship and becoming a symbol for national liberation and anti-imperialist struggles. For in the context of the United States' determination to discredit the Nicaraguan elections as fraudulent and undemocratic, a pluralist facade that masked a sinister totalitarianism, the Sandinistas won an important international victory on February 25, 1990. However, in the context of the U.S.'s determination to destroy the Sandinista revolution as an example of resistance from the periphery that could challenge the hegemony of the centre, the victory proved bittersweet.

The Central American crisis constitutes an immense and acute preoccupation for the United States of America because Central America is our neighbour and a strategic crossing of worldwide significance; since Cuba and the Soviet Union invest massive efforts to extend their influence and therefore carry out in the hemisphere plans which are particularly hostile to the interests of the United States; and because the people of Central America are troubled and in urgent need of our help.

—Henry Kissinger, Central American Bipartite Commission, 1984.¹

Some observers consider the liberalizing trends in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe proof that the Cold War is over and that the West has won. But they ignore the second major contradiction: that between the centre and the periphery.

—Jeanne Kilpatrick, *Baltimore Sun*, September 26, 1989.



The United States of America's aggression against Nicaragua, through low intensity warfare, covert and overt political intervention, and economic blockades and destabilization, has been an object of international condemnation since the Reagan Administration began funding and training counter-revolutionary ("Contra") forces in 1981. The duplicity of politicians and the complicity of the mainstream press in their tacit support of American interventionist policies abroad and of disinformation campaigns at home was analyzed by Noam Chomsky in *Turning the Tide* and *The Culture of Terrorism*.² Other investigations, such as Holly Seklar's *Washington's War on Nicaragua*, detailed the strategies and goals that lay beneath the whitewashed surface of the Administration's official interest in "helping" the people of Nicaragua.

Yet, it was only when the Iran-Contra scandal broke in 1986, with prime-time revelations of arms deals and unconstitutional activities, that the majority of Americans started to pay attention to the events unfolding in their "backyard" south of the border. A groundswell of outrage against a dirty war waged on their behalf, however, never materialized. While the means to an end were clearly repugnant to most Americans, the ideological assumptions that underpinned the Administration's goal of ending a revolutionary "nightmare" in Nicaragua and reinstating the hegemony of the American Dream were never fundamentally in question.

The impact of the Iran-Contra scandal on domestic politics was minimized by a slick public relations campaign which succeeded in diverting public attention away from the implications of a parallel base of power outside of Congress jurisdiction.

From the centre, the periphery remained just that: peripheral to the lived realities and mediated understandings of most Americans. The tensions created by 200 years of American intervention in the region never surfaced in reference to Nicaragua.³

Massive poverty and spiraling inflation, puppet regimes and widespread repression, growing militarization, crippling external debt payments and International Monetary Fund (IMF)-sponsored austerity programs remained issues inherent to Latin America rather than legacies of imperialism.

The United States' determination to destroy the Sandinista revolution as a dangerous example of resistance to a vicious cycle of neocolonialism and underdevelopment was never named as such. The roots of the North/South conflict that had given birth to the Sandinista model of political pluralism and a mixed economy were instead masked by a West/East axis ideology, enshrouded in a Cold War rhetoric of democracy versus totalitarianism. Thus, while the focus of Washington's aggression against Nicaragua would officially shift from a military to a political front during the Nicaraguan electoral process, the false symmetry of equating anti-imperialist and Third World struggles with the spectre of "communist cancers" remained intact.

By 1987, the options for achieving a military victory over the Sandinista government, short of a direct invasion by the United States, had virtually been exhausted.⁴ The combined resistance of the civilian population and the Sandinista Popular Army in Nicaragua had contained the majority of the Contra forces to their bases in Honduras. The heavy fighting from 1984 to 1986 had been reduced to border skirmishes and Contra attacks on "soft" (i.e., civilian) targets. The majority of the indigenous rebels, the Miskito Indians of the Atlantic Coast, had broken with the Contra leadership to return to Nicaragua and negotiate a settlement that became ratified as the Autonomy Law guaranteeing the ethnic groups of the Coast independent jurisdiction over regional issues.

The leaders of the five Central American countries, alarmed at the growing instability in the region created by Washington's proxy war on Nicaragua, closed their usually divisive ranks to support a peace plan proposed by Oscar Arias of Costa Rica. Esquipulas II, signed on August 7, 1987, established a framework for the pacification of the region. It called for a process of national reconciliation within each country to include dialogue with internal opposition groups, amnesty for political prisoners, democratization, free elections, an end to military aid and to the use of national territory by one government to support irregular or insurrectional forces seeking to destabilize a neighbouring country, a call for ceasefires with these forces, and the creation, in cooperation with the United Nations (UN) and the Organization of American States (OAS), of an international commission of support and verification.

It would be these accords and a subsequent summit held in Costa del Sol, El Salvador, on February 14, 1989, that set the diplomatic stage for the 1990 Nicaraguan elections. Nicaragua offered to advance its election date from November to February, reform its electoral and media laws in consultation with the opposition and

invite the OAS and the UN to observe the elections in return for the Central American Presidents' approval of a joint plan to demobilize the Contras. Responding to the Esquipulas II accords, Nicaragua created a National Conciliation Commission in the autumn of 1987 that included Archbishop Obando y Bravo, an outspoken critic of the Sandinista regime, initiated dialogue with the Group of 14 (a coalition of parliamentary and extra-parliamentary opposition parties that would later reform as the UNO), lifted the State of Emergency that had been in effect in varying degrees since 1982, and reopened the American-funded opposition paper *La Prensa*.⁵

By the spring of 1988, Nicaragua had begun direct peace talks with the Contras and declared a month-to-month unilateral ceasefire which remained in effect until November 1, 1989. Following the Costa del Sol accords of February 1989, 1,984 former members of Somoza's National Guard were released and the OAS accepted Nicaragua's invitation to observe the electoral process.

The United States' reaction to Nicaragua's compliance with the spirit and the law of the peace process in Central America was to approve a further \$49 million in "humanitarian" aid to the Contras in April 1989. While the provisions of the package prohibited funds for use in military offensives, they could be diverted to the "voluntary" demobilization and repatriation of the Contras, if requested by the five Central American presidents. Thus by enacting this legislation, U.S. President Bush had succeeded in ensuring that the diplomatic stage of the 1990 elections included the presence of a disruptive actor. Since the expiry date of the aid package, February 25, 1990, coincided with voting day in Nicaragua, it meant that the Contras, an irregular force of 15,000 to 20,000 men, would not only remain in place as a trump card to be used at an opportune moment but would also remain a decisive issue in the electoral campaign.





The importance of holding this trump card quickly became evident as Nicaragua succeeded in linking the demobilization of the Contras as a necessary condition to the holding of "free and fair" elections. For while the U.S. was upping the ante through its continued funding of the Contras, the FSLN was negotiating a series of concessions with the opposition parties that would lay the ground rules for the 1990 elections and achieve an unprecedented degree of national consensus. In April 1989, after two months of bilateral meetings between the FSLN and the opposition, a new media law forbidding censorship and guaranteeing freedom of information, and a number of amendments to the electoral law (including a controversial rule that permitted foreign campaign contributions provided that 50 per cent of all donations were given to the multi-party Supreme Electoral Council (CSE) to help finance the technical costs of the election) were passed by the National Assembly. On August 3, 1989, Daniel Ortega and representatives of the 18 legally recognized parties running in the election met to discuss further reforms demanded by the opposition, particularly by the now formally organized UNO coalition. When they emerged, after 24 hours of tense negotiations, an agreement had been reached that appeared to preclude the possibility of opposition parties withdrawing from the elections (as they had done in the 1984 elections) on the pretence that the process had lacked dialogue and democratic conditions. The terms of this historic National Dialogue included amnesty for all remaining political prisoners, the discontinuation of military conscription for the duration of the electoral process, expanded access to state television for the purposes of political advertising, and the transfer of authority over media violations from the Ministry of the Interior (MINT) to the CSE. The agreement also issued a call on behalf of all parties for the immediate demobilization of the Contras and an appeal against covert foreign intervention in the electoral process.

With these agreements in hand, Ortega was able to go to the regional summit, held in Tela, Honduras on August 7, 1989, with a formal demand for the Contras' demobilization endorsed by all political sectors in Nicaragua. In response, the five Central American presidents agreed at the Tela summit to establish December 5, 1989 as the fixed date for the dismantling of the Contras' Honduras bases and called upon the OAS and the UN to install the International Commission of Support and Verification (CIAV) as a monitoring mechanism. The signing of the National Dialogue and the Tela Accord within days of each other represented an important strategic victory for the FSLN. Ortega was able to strip the Contras of any remaining residue of legitimacy as a national resistance force and to offer the Nicaraguan people evidence that peace was within grasp and that democratic elections would proceed as planned. The immediate reaction of the Contra leadership, which announced that it was not a signatory to the agreement and would refuse to "voluntarily" demobilize, did not

undermine the diplomatic significance of an accord that had de facto numbered the Contras' days as an armed force. But by October 1989, more than 2000 heavily armed and freshly uniformed Contras had infiltrated Nicaragua to initiate a series of military offensive actions on a scale not witnessed since the declaration of unilateral ceasefire by the FSLN over a year and a half previously. The Contras' refusal to demobilize had the serious implication of becoming a threat to regional stability and to the democratic process of the election itself.

The Bush Administration, while maintaining that the Contras must remain in Honduras until after February 25 as a guarantee of "free and fair" elections, feigned concern at the sudden escalation of Contra violence inside Nicaraguan territory, intimating that the Contras were acting independently of official American policy. The effect of this dramatic increase in Contra activity, however, clearly worked in favour of the United States' interests. The ambushes, raids and murders of civilians, timed to coincide with the voter registration process in October, as well as the Contras' active proselytizing on behalf of the UNO, created a tense and uncertain atmosphere in Nicaragua. With the lifting of the ceasefire by Daniel Ortega on November 1, 1989, in response to the Contra ambush and murder of 18 unarmed reserve militia on their way to register to vote, the promise of peace that had seemed within reach receded even further before the spectre of a prolonged war. In the United States, the lifting of the ceasefire was construed as a deliberate attempt by the Sandinistas to undermine the electoral process and cancel the elections. A *New York Times* editorial, "Mr. Ortega's War," which appeared November 3, 1989, announced that Ortega "could have tried to mobilize diplomatic pressure to overcome Washington's foot-dragging on demobilizing the Contras, and U.S. indifference to rebel infiltration into Nicaragua. Instead, he has declared war and raised serious doubts about whether he's ready to risk free and fair elections. It is not a waning insurgency that appears to be Mr. Ortega's real target, but a swelling National Opposition Union."

The false symmetry of equating national liberation struggles with the rise of communist totalitarianism had been evoked in a different guise. The lifting of the ceasefire in Nicaragua was an opportunity to blur the distinction between self-defense of sovereign territory and unwarranted aggression.

Ten years of living dangerously has brought civil war, an exodus of one fifth of our countrymen, an annual inflation rate of 30,000 per cent and, for the first time in our country's history, mass hunger. Our industry and agriculture are paralysed. We have gone from being the bread basket of Central America to being a basket case.

—Violeta Chamorro, *Washington Post*, November 5, 1989.

While the signing of the Tela Accord and the National Dialogue was an important, if temporal, victory for the FSLN over American military and political intervention, their battle against the more insidious effects of economic destabilization had not been able to produce as visible results. The Contra war had taken a heavy toll on Nicaragua's primarily agro-export based economy. With 50 per cent of the GNP directed towards military self-defense and the Contras targetting of health, educational, and agricultural cooperatives destroying much of the infrastructure created in the first years of the revolution, the social backbone of the Sandinista project, though not broken by the war, had been severely crippled.

The private sector turned against the revolutionary government when it became apparent that, even though land reform and state acquisitions had been paced to accommodate private interests, the freedom to function economically did not go hand in hand with the acquisition of political power. Attempts to work in harmony with private business met with sabotage and capital flight, production slowdown and obstruction. In the political sphere, the private sector formed a powerful lobby group, COSEP (The Higher Council of Private Enterprise), openly aligning itself with the Contra leadership and subsequently forming the right-wing faction of the UNO alliance. The United States' commercial boycott and international loans blockade added further strains to an economy suffering from the intransigence of private business and \$12 billion in war damages.⁶

Unrealistic economic strategies implemented by the Sandinistas in the earlier years of the revolution also served to exacerbate a mounting economic crisis. Rigid wage and price controls, production incentives and overgenerous credit rates, when combined with an artificially low currency, fuelled speculation, spurred the growth of an underground economy and created a black market.

By 1988, with Hurricane Joan adding a final blow to an already devastated economy, inflation hit a world record of 36,000 per cent. In the state sector, real wages fell below subsistence levels. Factories, lacking workers, parts and incentives, produced at low levels. Poor agricultural yields and plummeting world coffee prices decreased food supplies and increased trade imbalances. Speculation was rampant. Unemployment soared.

To address the severity of the economic crisis, the Sandinista government imposed an IMF-model austerity plan in January 1989, which called for slashing state employment, cutting social services and reducing preferential credit and exchange rates. These measures, when combined with the steps taken since 1987 to lessen wage and price control and liberalize export relations, had a tremendous impact on both workers and peasants. But even though inflation had been reduced to 1000 per cent, the price of basic foodstuffs soared beyond the reach of many people.





Seeking international aid to soften the blow of these austerity measures, the Nicaraguan government met in May 1989 with eight European countries in Stockholm, Sweden. An IMF report had found their efforts to rectify the economic situation positive, but noted the necessity of an immediate infusion of \$250 million to stimulate production and offset the hardships exacted upon the poorer sectors. The Sandinistas were able to obtain a commitment from the eight countries to meet the IMF recommendation. After sustained pressure from the United States, however, only two countries, Sweden and Spain, came through with their portion (\$30 million) of the promised aid.⁷

Thus, in their efforts to break a 10-year boycott in the international loan market, the FSLN's last bargaining tool became the 1990 elections. Their electoral slogan "*todo sera mejor*" (everything will be better) reflected the hope that with the UN and OAS legitimization of the elections as "free and fair," Europe would not bend so easily to American pressure.

The UNION NACIONAL OPOSITORA (UNO), aware of the fact that our country suffers the most delicate crisis of its history, basically as a consequence of the dictatorial and totalitarian system and the administrative disaster of the Sandinista regime, considers that its immediate task consists of dynamic and sustained action capable of rescuing the Nicaraguan people from the social and economic prostration in which they are immersed.

—Preamble for the UNO election platform, August 24, 1989.

From here to the year 2000, a social structure will have been created that is illuminated by the final demolition of the ruins we have inherited and by the birth of an economy overflowing with health and development. In the next years we will be able to do everything that was not possible to do because of the war. . . . The political platform of the FSLN is none other than the ratification of our historical platform in new conditions. . . . Never have our dreams been more real. And with our electoral victory we will ratify the irreversible destiny of our sovereignty, our liberty and our independence.

—Tomas Borge, FSLN Party Convention speech, Sept. 24, 1989.⁸

In terms of conventional political wisdom, the objective consequences created by ten years of low intensity warfare and economic destabilization would appear to have left the FSLN as an incumbent government at a significant disadvantage in an electoral contest. The 1990 elections, however, were not framed by this assumption by either the United States or the UNO, both claiming that an opposition in Nicaragua had little



chance of winning against the stacked deck of an "undemocratic" revolutionary regime. In September 1989, as the UNO fought among themselves over presidential nominations and the FSLN mounted festive and well-orchestrated party conventions, the claim that the UNO had no chance of winning over the FSLN appeared to have a strong justification in reality, although not for the reasons forwarded by either the U.S. or the opposition. The initial image of the UNO in the beginning stages of the campaign as an ineffectual mishmash of conflicting interests and opposing ideologies never really changed throughout the electoral process. The selection of the American-backed candidate, Violeta Chamorro, the politically inexperienced widow of assassinated *La Prensa* editor Pedro Chamorro, over COSEP's choice of Enrique Bolanos, a politically astute and economically powerful cotton grower, was the first signal that the UNO would be fraught by internal divisions and incoherent strategies.⁹ Revelations in November of links to the Contras, infighting and corruption further discredited the coalition. On November 1, 1989, a communique issued by Enrique Bermudez, as leader of the Contras, announced his refusal to demobilize his troops in order to give "unconditional support and help to the candidates of the UNO."¹⁰ On November 7, *Barricada* published a letter written to Enrique Bermudez from UNO campaign organizer Alfredo Cesar stating that the election campaign of the UNO required the presence of an armed force.¹¹ Cesar's subsequent expulsion from the UNO Political Council and his appointment by Violeta Chamorro as her personal adviser only served to increase internal tensions and further suspicions that the UNO and the Contras were working hand in hand. Meanwhile, Virgilio Godoy, the Vice-Presidential candidate of the UNO, was accused by members of his own Independent Liberal Party (PLI) of embezzling funds and was stripped of his parliamentary immunity by the National Assembly in December. By January 1990, when Antonio Layaco, the campaign manager of the UNO, and Virgilio Godoy were physically fistfighting on stage during a political rally, divisions within the UNO had become a highly public and embarrassing affair.

In spite of \$9 million in election aid to the UNO (approved by the U.S. Congress on October 17, 1989) to make up in hard cash what the UNO coalition lacked in organization and popular support, the UNO campaign remained weak and lifeless. Fears that the influx of the American aid package to create a "level playing field" would result in an upsurge of slick campaign strategies and burgeoning grass-roots organizations with paid "volunteers" went unfounded. The UNO's attempts to avoid paying 50 per cent of political campaign contributions to the Supreme Electoral Council by channelling the money into "non-partisan" democratic educational groups such as Via Civica and the hastily constructed Institute for Electoral Promotion and Training (IPCE) only served to encourage graft and increase bickering

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among recipients. The number of organizations receiving funds and the role of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) as the American administrator seeking loopholes and accountability impeded the level of coordinated planning.¹² By February 1990, as Violeta Chamorro continued to stumble over ghostwritten speeches she hesitantly read during poorly attended rallies and the polls indicated that the UNO suffered a negative image as a party too closely aligned with U.S. interests, it seemed as if the strategy of political intervention by the Americans had failed.

Although the UNO failed to mount an effective and visible campaign, it did succeed in undermining the model of political pluralism the Sandinistas had envisioned developing through the electoral process. In theory, the Nicaraguan electoral process was designed to offer all parties an equal opportunity to present their points of view during the campaign and, with their election to the National Assembly, create a forum for resolving ideological differences and interest conflicts through discussion and negotiation. In practice, however, the UNO's participation shifted the focus of the electoral contest away from a multi-party race based on national issues and towards a polarized battle fought between sovereignty and imperialism. Coherent and considered debate that focused on concrete economic and social issues deteriorated into a media war where promises of peace and economic prosperity were articulated in an accusatory atmosphere that pitted patriotism against American salvation. As the U.S.-backed opposition, the UNO promised the Nicaraguan people that they had the ear of the Bush Administration when it came to the issues of lifting the economic blockade and ending the Contra war. Replaying the American paradigm of East totalitarianism versus West freedom, the UNO and *La Prensa* unleashed an inflammatory stream of rhetoric in which the Sandinistas, as blood-thirsty communists/dictators, had imposed a reign of terror and deprivation, bringing war and economic chaos to a country where the leaders lived in castles and the poor died of starvation.

Daniel Ortega responded by denouncing the UNO at FSLN rallies as a scrambled mess of nothing (*UNO no es niguno*), a haven for ex-Somocistas and ex-Contras and a coalition that had sold its soul to imperialism. Meanwhile, the "centre" of the political spectrum, represented by Eric Ramirez's Social Christian Party (PSC), was squeezed from view (failing to obtain any seats in the National Assembly in the February 25 vote) while other smaller parties faded into obscurity during the initial stages of the electoral campaign.

The fascinating thing is that everybody knows, or should know by now, what a rat the commandante [Daniel Ortega] is. Yet we count on him to keep his pledged word. We react with visible hurt when he shows us unworthy of his trust. It's like the final scene of the Hollywood classic, "Key Largo." Edward G. Robinson, palming the pistol he professes not to have, whines for

his adversary, Humphrey Bogart, to come out and show himself. Bogey proves himself too smart for that old canard. You wonder why men charged with running the destinies of nations sometimes lack the intelligence and insight of a movie actor.

—William Marchson, Editorial, *Washington Times*, Nov. 3, 1989.

On December 10, 1989, the simmering tensions created by a polarized electoral landscape erupted into overt violence at an UNO rally in Masatepe (30 miles south of Managua), leaving a Sandinista supporter dead, 15 wounded and the campaign headquarters of the FSLN destroyed. Although the OAS issued a report following the incident that stated, "It is impossible to determine who is responsible for the initiation of violence," UNO used Masatepe to threaten withdrawal from the elections while the American press echoed its early November accusations that the FSLN was conspiring to create an excuse for the cancellation of the elections. Added to the Contra card that Washington had played out in the autumn was the added worry that the UNO and the U.S. were planning a series of provocations in order to delegitimize the Nicaraguan elections and further exacerbate an atmosphere of polarization and fear.

While millions of East Germans swept through West Berlin like Hurricane Hugo last weekend, apparatchiks all over Eastern Europe began to get the idea that the crumbling of communism had finally begun. Yet in Central America, the revanchists are holding on. El Salvador's Marxist FMLN hoisted its red and black banderole last Saturday night, launching a major assault on the capital city. . . . "Our mission is to win or die," a young rebel dramatically told reporters. "This is our last battle." We hope it will be, if the Salvadorans and the Bush Administration finally get serious about bringing peace to Central America. At least they seem to have recognized the source of the problem, which isn't Salvadoran political or economic conditions but the communist governments in Managua and Havana.

—"Communism's Last Battle," Editorial, *Washington Times*, November 17, 1989.

The unfolding of the electoral process in the autumn of 1989 was not only marked by Contra infiltration, the lifting of the ceasefire, polarization and suspected American covert action, but also demarcated by the sudden escalation of tensions in the region. With the military offensive launched by the FMLN (Farabundi Marti National Liberation Front) on November 11 and the Christmas invasion of Panama by the Americans, what in August 1989 had looked like a future horizon of negotiated settlements threatened, by December 1989, to engulf all of Central America in a regional war. In the wake of the FMLN offensive, troop movements in Honduras and Guatemala were rumoured. The reports of the genocidal bombing of civilian neighbourhoods in El Salvador evoked memories in Nicaragua of the 1979 insurrection which blurred with the present escalation of Contra activity inside Nicaragua.



Efforts by the FSLN throughout November to hold a series of talks with the Contras under the auspices of the UN and the OAS failed to advance an agreement on their demobilization. The alleged discovery of a crashed Nicaraguan plane carrying weapons inside El Salvadoran territory was used by Alfredo Christiani, the President of El Salvador, to sever diplomatic relations with the Nicaraguan government. The San Isidro de Coronado regional summit, held in Costa Rica on December 12, 1989, temporarily defused hostilities. The five Central American presidents signed an agreement reaffirming the legitimate sovereignty of each government and calling upon the United States to divert funding for Contra maintenance to the CIAV for purposes of their demobilization. This respite from two months of escalating tensions, however, proved fleeting. The invasion of Panama on December 20, 1989 and the invasion of the Nicaraguan ambassador's residence by U.S. troops a week later led Daniel Ortega to declare that in ten years of revolution U.S./Nicaragua relations had never been as strained. Although Bush's nonchalant admission of a "screw-up" over the Panama incident once again defused overt hostilities, the people of Nicaragua had lived through two months of roller-coaster tensions, with American strong-arm tactics still looming large over Central America.

By mid-January 1990, a surface calm had descended upon Managua, the maximum alert from the Panama invasion was lifted and the army tanks in the city streets were replaced by an urban landscape of political slogans and billboard election advertising. The fear generated by the Masatepe incident and American press coverage that the UNO would withdraw from the electoral races diminished. By the time 3000 international observers and 1500 international journalists descended upon Nicaragua in the last two weeks of February to witness the most carefully scrutinized electoral process in the history of the world, the roller-coaster tensions of the autumn had been displaced by a festive campaign atmosphere. FSLN T-shirts, hats, and slogans of "Daniel es mi gallo" (Daniel is my rooster)¹³ inundated Managua, while UNO propaganda, suddenly appearing three weeks before the election, was scarce and unimaginative. Salsa tunes written especially for the FSLN election campaign flooded the state airwaves, while opposition stations continued to harangue listeners with a litany of grievances about Sandinista intimidation of UNO supporters and abuse of the state infrastructure. On television, the UNO commercials, with images of misery and starving children searching through garbage cans, sought to emphasize the economic crisis, while the FSLN rock-video upbeat propaganda sought to evoke a future of peace and happiness.

In the last week of the campaign, each side claimed potential victory. The UNO complained that the FSLN could only win through election day fraud; the FSLN explained that an extensive campaign of door-to-door visits and public rallies across the nation had confirmed

that they were and would be the party of the people. When, on February 18, the UNO held its final rally at the Plaza of the revolution, 40,000 people gathered to hear Violeta Chamorro dressed in virgin white promise economic salvation. The UNO rally, however, proved no match for the FSLN spectacle mounted in the Plaza Carlos Fonseca on February 25 complete with 500,000 cheering fans, girls dancing to Batman themes, dazzling fireworks and a Jimmy Cliff concert. A number of polling companies had conducted surveys throughout the electoral process showing Daniel Ortega leading Violeta Chamorro. Their final opinion surveys, released in February, showed Ortega swinging even further ahead. The only polls contradicting this trend were clearly identified opposition surveys whose links to *La Prensa* and refusal to release methodology made them suspect in the eyes of most political analysts.¹⁴ By the time the campaign officially closed, it seemed as if the FSLN could not help but sweep the election day vote, the only doubt remaining was the American acceptance of their victory. On voting day itself, rumours that exit polls showing the UNO leading would be released before the official count appeared to be one last desperate attempt to discredit the FSLN win and to provoke election day violence. On February 25, 1990, as people across Nicaragua waited patiently in line to cast their ballots, hundreds of writers, including myself, prepared to write analyses of the Sandinista triumph, citing the victory of grassroots organization and popular democracy over a badly managed American intervention. Forgotten in the frantic days that preceded February 25, as the world descended upon this small, war-torn, heat-drenched country to witness history's most carefully scrutinized elections, were the events of the autumn: the escalation of Contra activity, the invasion of Panama, the grinding effects of an economic crisis. The fiesta atmosphere had temporarily masked the underlying tensions of a ten-year struggle against American aggression and camouflaged the exhaustion of a people whose project for self-determination had meant confronting the wrath of the most powerful nation in the hemisphere.

For the Frente Sandinista [FSLN] democracy is not measured only in the political terrain and is not reduced to the participation of the people in elections. Democracy... means participation of the people in political, economic, social and cultural affairs. Democracy is initiated in the economic order, when social inequities begin to weaken, when workers and peasants begin to improve their standard of living.

—FSLN, 1980.

I believe that it is important that we begin to analyse the anti-imperialist revolutionary model and ask ourselves why it has ended in economic failure which is finally the essential aspect of each revolution. For one does not make a revolution in order to fortify war, but in order to see economic results, and it is these results that we have not seen.

—Victor Tirado, National Direction, 1990.¹⁵

On March 1, 1990, however, as I prepare to close this chapter in the story of the Nicaraguan elections, it seems as if the past cannot not be so easily forgiven, nor the future of reconciliation so easily attained. Thus, while the people of Nicaragua may have voted in a "free and fair" election to end a confrontation with the United States of America, this electoral exercise of democracy did not end a confrontation with inheritances of a ten-year war and with the disparities created by the "economic totalitarianism" of a global economy that divides the hemisphere into the centre and the periphery, into First and Third worlds, into developed and underdeveloped nations.

For ten years Nicaragua has been at the crossroad of an anti-imperialist struggle, of a North/South conflict, of an East/West rhetoric. As an epicentre of the periphery's struggle against a vicious cycle of neocolonialism and underdevelopment, the results of the 1990 Nicaraguan elections were felt as seismological shocks across the hemisphere. The victory of the UNO, however, was not an earthquake powerful enough to topple ten years of revolutionary infrastructure. The story of the 1990 Nicaraguan elections that began on July 19, 1979, when the FSLN promised the people of Nicaragua a revolutionary model of political pluralism, social justice and a mixed economy, did not end on February 25 with the verification of "free and fair" elections by 3000 international observers and 1500 journalists. In 1990, the FSLN as a political party was defeated at the polls, but as long as the world remains divided into the strong and the weak, the rich and the poor, the dream of self-determination bequeathed by the Sandinista revolution will continue to be lived out in the struggle at the periphery for economic and social justice. For during ten years of revolution, the people of Nicaragua did not only live an experience of war and economic deprivation, but also the experience of conscious politicization and popular democracy: the realization of a national literacy campaign, mass organization and industry unionization, control over national resources, an army of and for the people, freedom of expression, freedom from repression, free education, free elections. The Sandinista vision of economic equality and prosperity may have been obstructed by ten years of American aggression, but the ideals of the revolution have passed into the collective memory of the people.

The false symmetry of East/West rhetoric and North/South conflict suggests the enormity of the struggle that lies before the Nicaraguan people in their search for a model of resistance and revolution in the face of an expansionist American capitalism, in a hemisphere where the periphery sinks deeper into a vicious circle of external debt and escalating poverty. Historical conditions gave birth to the guerilla victory of the Sandinistas in 1979. The historical conditions that brought them electoral defeat in 1990 do not signify the end of a revolution, rather they presage a future where the confrontation between imperialism and self-determination is just beginning. ■

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: The author would like to thank the Agencia Nueva Nicaragua, Alberto Gomez and Oliver Kellhammer.

Dot Tuer, a freelance writer from Toronto, has spent the last six months in Nicaragua researching a book on the country.

Further coverage of Nicaragua by Dot Tuer will appear in an upcoming issue of FUSE.

ENDNOTES

1. Silva-Michelena, Jose, ed. *Latin America: Peace, Democracy and Economic Crisis* (London: Zed Books, 1988), p.123.

2. As a sequel to *Turning The Tide* (Boston: South End Press, 1985), *The Culture of Terrorism* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1988) examines the Iran-Contra scandal and its implications for American foreign policy.

3. In their October 1989 issue, *Envio*, a Managua-based magazine published by the Instituto Historico Centroamericano, published a list of nearly 100 direct U.S. interventions in Latin America since 1806.

4. In *Washington's War on Nicaragua* (Toronto: Between The Lines, 1988), pp. 368-71, Sklar describes a Centre for Defense Information (CDI) document issued in 1987 that discusses an invasion scenario involving 50,000 American troops with U.S. casualties estimated at 3000 dead, 9000 wounded, and Nicaraguan casualties at 10,000 dead and 30,000 wounded. The plan included an estimated cost of the invasion at \$7 billion with an additional \$6 billion required over four to five years to rebuild the post-invasion economy.

5. In a report issued by Hemispheres Initiatives, an American election observer group, it was revealed that from 1984 to 1989 *La Prensa* had received 72 per cent of the National Endowment for Democracy's allocation of \$1,137,405. for the funding of internal opposition media. In 1985 alone, these funds covered the entire operating costs of the newspaper. "Nicaraguan Election Update #2: Foreign Funding of the Internal Opposition," *Hemispheres Initiatives*, October 16, 1989.

6. In Gerardo Timossi's *Centroamerica, Dueda Externa y Ajuste Estructural: Las transformaciones Economicas de la Crisis* (Costa Rica: CRIES, 1989), a statistical table on p. 129 shows that Nicaragua did not receive external loan financing after 1983. Until 1983, the World Bank and the Interamerican Development Bank gave minimal loan assistance, while the IMF has maintained a complete boycott from 1979.

7. Information given by Migel D'Escoto in a speech to North American observer groups and solidarity workers on February 23, 1990. See also "Two Voices From The Private Sector," *Envio*, Vol. 8, #99 (October 1989), pp. 30-39.

8. Tomas Borge, "Por Que Votaremos Por Daniel." Speech reprinted in the FSLN official newspaper, *Barricada*, September 26, 1989, p. 3. (translation the author)

9. Violeta Chamorro was promoted by U.S. advisers for her "Cory Aquino" image as the widow of *La Prensa* editor Pedro Chamorro. His assassination by Somoza in 1978 united a broad spectrum of Nicaraguan society with the FSLN against the Somoza regime.

10. A copy of the original letter was reprinted in *Barricada*, November 3, 1989, p. 5. (translation the author)

11. A copy of the original letter was reprinted in *Barricada*, November 7, 1989, p. 2.

12. For more information on American political intervention see Holly Sklar, "Washington wants to buy Nicaragua's Elections Again," *Z Magazine*, Vol. 2, No. 12 (December 1989) and "The Failure of the U.S. Intervention in Nicaraguan Elections" (available from Institute for Media Analysis, Nicaraguan Elections Project, No. 5, Aptdo 789, Managua, Nicaragua. Tel. 22836.)

13. "Daniel es mi gallo" refers to betting on the winner in a cockfight. The slogan also alludes to sexual virility and strength.

14. Nicaraguan polling firms ECO, DOXA, and American firms Univision, Greenberg-Lake, and ABC-Washington Post showed the FSLN leading in various polls conducted from October 1989 to February 1990. Borge & Associates of Costa Rica and a Via Civica poll conducted for *La Prensa* and NED all showed the UNO with a substantial lead.

15. From an interview with Victor Tirado conducted by Sergio Ferrari of the Agencia Nueva de Nicaragua. *Barricada*, March 20, 1990, p. 3. (translation the author)

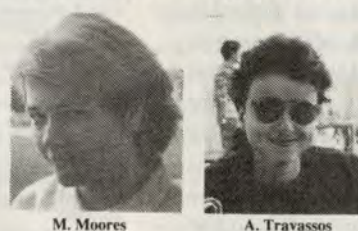
REVIEWS



[FILM & VIDEO]

Having the Last Laugh

Still from *Surely to God*.



M. Moores

A. Travassos

MARGARET MOORES & ALMERINDA TRAVASSOS

Labyris Rising; Our Common Dream; Trip to Toronto; X-Spot; Anne Ace; Frankly, Shirley; Desire Obscura; Surely to God.

by Becki Ross

Claiming that lesbian experience is either dismissed, distorted or erased by producers of commercial mass media, is an understatement. To my horror, halfway through *Where the Spirit Lives*, CBC's controversial 1989 TV docu-drama on the state-enforced placement of Native children in Prairie residential schools, a sneaky, pinched, lesbian pedophile jumped out at me from behind closed doors. Several years ago on *DeGrassi Junior High*, the rumoured lesbianism of an "otherwise popular" teacher was conveniently squelched by her eventual (and all too smug) denial. The recent "Chastity Bono is gay and Cher is reeling from disgust" exposés in the *National Enquirer* and *Star* tabloids are rife with "expert"

wranglings over whether female homosexuality is determined by an absent, rejecting father or by predisposed masculinity. Some of this stuff makes the "furtive, forbidden, twilight" lesbian love that is smeared through many 1950s pulp novels seem downright appealing. While the treasured *Codco* from St. John's, and Toronto's zany *Kids in the Hall* both serve up often side-splitting, super-stereo-typed gay male sketches weekly on television, a wide circulation of diverse, lesbian-positive imagery is almost unimaginable. Considering this absence alongside the "facelessness" of other oppressed groups (women, working class people and people of colour), it's not surprising that "visibility must be fought

for, never freely given, and history is always something that keeps getting lost."²

Enter Marg Moores and Almerinda Travassos. For over 10 years, Marg and Almerinda have shared a love of, and a commitment to, the production of film and video for and about lesbians. In the tradition of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, Frances Loring and Florence Wyle, Edith S. Watson and Victoria Hayward, since early 1978 (and their chance meeting at the Revolutionary Workers League headquarters in the Louis Riel Bookstore), they've also shared a feminist politic, a home, and a deep respect for each other's talents and abilities. Quick to credit the lesbian, feminist and art communities with the inspiration as well as the context for the creation and reception of their work, Marg and Almerinda succeed, often brilliantly, in displacing the taken-for-granted heterosexual standpoint; into the space wedged open, they insinuate a shameless lesbian stance.

The radical beginnings of feminist and lesbian cultural and political movements can be traced back to the early 1970s in large urban centres across the U.S., Canada and Quebec. Collectives of self-identified lesbians emerged from the heady ferment of mass political action and social change: in the U.S., groups like the Radicalesbians in New York, the Furies in Washington, D.C., and the Gutter Dykes in Ann Arbor, Michigan announced the birth of autonomous lesbian cultural and political organizing. Two lesbian conferences were staged in Montreal in 1974 and 1975. In Vancouver, the Lesbian Caucus of the British Columbia Federation of Women formed in 1974, and several caucus members assumed control of the feminist newspaper *The Pedestal* for five issues. In the spring of 1977, the Lesbian Organization of Toronto (LOOT), the Three of Cups Coffeehouse and the radical feminist newspaper *The Other Woman* took up

residence at 342 Jarvis St. in downtown Toronto and collectively constituted the first lesbian centre in the country.

Through "rap groups," drop-ins, printed manifestos, and public demonstrations, "new lesbians" gave vent to their outrage at the erasure and/or the dismissal of lesbian issues inside the women's movement, gay liberation and the new left. Undaunted by myriad obstacles, this wave of largely white, middle class, urban and college-educated lesbian feminists set out to wrest the category "lesbian" away from the heterosexual consensus of sin, sickness and criminality (and the so-called "heterosexual mimicry" of butch/femme bar culture). In so doing, they urged an appeal to lesbian pride, strength and visibility. To many, lesbianism became synonymous with the creation of an idealized woman-identified community based on principles of sharing a rich inner life, bonding against male tyranny, and giving and receiving practical and political support.³

Central to, and at times inseparable from, more traditional forms of political action, has been the slow but growing eruption of lesbian cultural work: photography, writing, performance art, music, film and video. By the late '70s in Toronto and elsewhere, Olivia Records, the lesbian presses of Daughters, Inc., Diana and Naiad, the *Cunt Coloring Book*, J.E.B.'s photos and Adrienne Rich's 21 love poems had become the treasured property (bought or borrowed) of lesbian communal households. On the Canadian and Quebec scene, musicians Carol and April, Ferron, Beverly Glenn Copeland, Mama Quilla II, the All Girls Leather Marching Band, a host of television producers, performance artists and poets began to stretch art forms to embrace a lesbian sensibility in the comfort of largely "wimmin-only" surroundings. Caught up in this festival of lesbian exuberance, Toronto-based film and video makers Marg Moores and Almerinda Travassos conspired to contribute their own special voice.

Asked to comment on the development of their explicitly lesbian feminist attention to questions of sex, gender and representation, Marg and Almerinda highlight the importance of their participation (as curators, exhibitors or viewers) in a 1981 feminist film festival at the now defunct Funnel Gallery, the 1983 *Alter Eros* show (Gallery 940, Gallery 76 and A Space), the two *Women's Erotic Film Language* events in 1985 and 1987 (A Space), and *Sight Specific: Lesbians and Representation* in 1987 (A Space). Inside the film/video art community, they find support from Richard Fung, John Greyson, Lynne Fernie, Colin Campbell and other, primarily lesbian and gay, independent artists. Almerinda and Marg also point to their involvement with the LOOT in the late 1970s, and later, the socialist-feminist International Women's Day Committee (IWDC) and Lesbians Against the Right (LAR) as key sites of personal/political education. Moving into and out from these overlapping communities for over a decade, this gifted dyad is more intent than ever on stirring up a potent brew (and lots of thirsty guzzlers).

At present, Marg works full-time at Nellie's Hostel (a shelter for battered women) and Almerinda works three days a week at Trinity Square Video (an artists' and community video production fa-

cility). Increasingly, they receive commissions from community groups to produce promotional or educational videos. For example, they've just finished crewing for Inner-city Youth Link on *Street Wise Women*, a tape about safer sex for women. In the temporal gaps that remain, they've managed to produce on average one film or video a year (and have never been able to spend more than \$6,000 per tape). While small budgets mean half-hour (or 10-minute) videos rather than feature-length films, friends as actors, fewer (expensive) technical innovations, and the need to be a "jill" of all trades, Almerinda adds that video allows for more risk-taking, more control and less compulsion to self-censor.

With regard to the nuts and bolts of the actual process, Marg writes and directs, Almerinda does cinematography and directs, and both partners produce the work. They insist that, "living together and working together could be hell, but it's not." Hell for Marg is the one editing day chock-full of temper tantrums; for Almerinda, it's the lack of recognition for her more "invisible" labour. Complaints and less than ideal working conditions aside, they've managed to imprint film/video art practice with a distinctive lesbian-feminist stamp. And in so doing, they've hooked yet another fan.



Production still from *Our Common Dream*.

In all, the Moores/Travassos connection has generated eight lesbian-centred films and videos. One of their first efforts, the lesbian cult propaganda-tool *Labyris Rising* (1980) chronicles early lesbian feminist praxis: dope-smoking, bare-breasted jamming at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, pool-playing, poring over the American feminist periodical *off our backs*, marching and dancing on International Women's Day, all set to the music of Joan Armatrading, Janis Joplin, Be Be K'Roche and Heather Bishop. Lesbian history is further elaborated in *Our Common Dream* (produced for the Woman's Common in 1986). Here, a series of women reminisce about dyke bars like Sara Ellen Dunlop's Music Room, the Continental (a.k.a. "the blood bucket") and Pat Murphy's Fly By Night Lounge. At the same time, they fantasize about the perfect women-only space (above-ground, with clean bathrooms and a patio where Notso Amazon softball players might congregate).

Never predictable, the stories Marg and Almerinda tell often take unlikely twists and turns. Two notorious lesbians masquerade as suburban housewives on a *Trip to Toronto* (1981). Eager to introduce their kids and hubbies to famous postcard landmarks, they tour the "magnificent" Eaton's Centre, Honest Ed's ("he owns half the town") and City Hall ("the spaceship where they run the city"). Marge and Marcie are left speechless when a cross-dressing ruffian steals their home video camera and substitutes scenes of Kensington Market's vital hustle and bustle for the concrete, corporate character of "world class" Toronto.

In the film *X-Spot* (1983) a perpetrator of (hetero)sexual harassment who is pursued by his female victim finds himself, soaked in sweat, momentarily safe inside a public "men's room" only to be caught and humiliated by the triumphant heroine. Punctuating the narrative is a succession of images of the young girls' game, "paddy cake, paddy cake," transformed into a powerful, collective

women's ritual designed to crack the silence that protects male attackers. Scenes from an early Take Back the Night demonstration reveal the angry passion of organized revolt against male violence that erupted in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and can be seen once again in the resurgence of coordinated anti-violence activism that has followed the Montreal massacre in December 1989.

Less comfortable with serious drama, Marg and Almerinda invent characters and predicaments that are at once delightfully funny and politically provocative. Dashing dyke detective Anne Ace, sickened by photos of men basted, buttoned and zigzagged to death, sets out to solve the Sewing Machine Murder Mystery (*Anne Ace*, 1981). An underdog advocate familiar with the "seamy" side of life and determined to prove the police wrong, Anne visits the Ladies' Quilting and Bombing Society and is convinced of their innocence (in smart lesbian double-speak, the members claim they "do everything by hand"). She then heads for the garment district where she discovers the murder weapon (a battery-operated Bernina) and apprehends the real killer—a down-and-out tailor driven mad by changing fashions.

The irreverent humour I've come to relish in so much of Almerinda and Marg's work is perhaps most effectively played out on the divisive, hotly contested terrain of lesbian sex. Caught off guard by the wild success of the bold and controversial *Frankly, Shirley*, they now point to this "very small video" as a watershed in their career. The video gives luscious, full treatment to the public, (ordinarily tabooed) recreational sex between lesbians; the make-believe front-page headline in *The Toronto Sun* reads: "Girl Sex: Lezzie Washroom Arrest." The power of the piece is that it breaks rules (anonymous sex = bad; tender, romantic love = good) with outrageous, yet honorable intentions, for example, the vertiginous pleasure of oral sex in a Club Monaco fitting room one busy

Saturday afternoon.

"Cunning linguists" through and through, Marg and Almerinda make sure their texts drip with innuendo and word plays. In *Surely to God* (1989), the poker table is not the only place "Mandy is very handy." News that the Lucky Draw lottery is "worth 42 million... and rising," is met with a well-timed chorus of ooooohs and giggles. And just when there's hope that justice may prevail, the lezzie protagonists discover their winning lottery ticket frozen to the chicken they carelessly forgot on the kitchen counter while making out to the frenzied beat of game show *Wheel of Fortune* on the floor among endless stacks of to-be-recycled newspapers—punishment for engaging in that horrible, degenerate and addictive vice?

Sex is depicted with lustful vengeance in several of the videos—*Frankly, Shirley*, *Surely to God* and *Desire Obscura* (a semi-autobiographical, non-narrative tale of longing filmed in 1988). All three contain beautifully rendered and mildly arousing cameos—sex as smooth and easy as A.B.C. (all but the cherry). Still scouring "the life" for that steamy, no holds barred feature turn-on, I'm nonetheless thrilled by alternatives to worn-out, clichéd, American nature romps.

A willingness to challenge both the medium and themselves doesn't stop at sex. In a community that still places a high premium on unity, commonality and "true lesbian identity," Marg has devised a diversity of characters to jump-start her stories off the page—the 1920s aristocratic "invert," the closeted gay business lady, the working class poker player, the bilingual traveller, the Montréal-style baby butch, the dyke bike mechanic and the flaunting femme. Missing from this eclectic repertoire, however, and from the content described above, is evidence of a pro-active commitment to the development and integration of an anti-racist perspective. Marg and Almerinda are acutely aware of this absence; they told me to expect overdue changes to old, familiar patterns in their next project.



Stills from *Labyris Rising* (right) and *Anne Ace* (left)

Except for a couple of reviews in art magazines (and a short piece in *Now*), there has been little critical engagement with the Moores/Travassos oeuvre, even in the feminist and lesbian/gay press. Part of this dismissal, they feel, is the reading of their work as "light, fluffy comedy" and the privileging of "heavy, more serious" lesbian print. And yet they're convinced that the prospect of reaching viewers through scenes negotiated by live lesbian flesh is sweeter (and increasingly more popular) than the publishing of "ideologically sound" theory. The screen has also been made the site of lesbian cultural/political praxis by video artists Marusia Bociurkiw (*Playing with Fire, Night Visions*) and Diane Heffernan & Suzanne Vertu (*Memoir de Notre Hystoire*); filmmakers Midi Onodera (*Ten Cents a Dance, The Displaced View*), Lorna Boschman (*Butch/Femme in Paradise*), Jeanne Crepeau (*Le film de Justine*), and Lynne Fernie & Aerlyn Weissman (*B-Movie*, upcoming fall 1990).

Marg and Almerinda have noticed considerable growth in both the size and diversity of their primarily lesbian audience since the first showing of *Labyris Rising* at the Funnel in 1981. Through several gallery shows, retrospectives at

the Woman's Common and the 519 Church St. Community Centre, they have developed a loyal following within the lesbian community that filled the Euclid Theatre at two of their recent screenings. Participation in several international lesbian and gay film and video festivals has also meant more viewers, and the sale of tapes to the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the National Art Gallery in Ottawa has indicated, as well, institutional recognition of their contribution to video art practice. Except for the "revolutionary feminist" attack on *Frankly, Shirley* as "male-identified, pornographic pulp" at a gay disco in Leicester, England, the overall community response has been superb (though often not a source of constructive criticism).

Future plans are ambitious. Recapturing their fascination with more experimental film and video-making, producing a third and final episode in the "Shirley/Surely" series (*Surely But Slowly*), recreating the "Dykes in the Street" march (1982), and releasing that ever-elusive feature film (tentatively titled *Lipstick Rising*) are high on this pair's list. Whether Marg and Almerinda will be able to sustain and enrich the special collaborative magic out of which their bold, lesbian

and feminist vision materializes, remains to be seen. Given what I've viewed to date, I can't say I'm worried.

After all, they're in the business of creating real live lesbian s/heroes, sex and stories that are funny and never didactic, that speak to, and have meaning for, ordinary lesbians in our everyday lives. As Anne Ace might say, "in a world full of sickos, some of whom even run countries," their visual representation of up-front, multi-dimensional lesbian reality not only disrupts conventional and much non-commercial image-making, it positively shocks. ■

Becki Ross is a member of the *Rites* magazine Editorial Collective and is doing research on lesbian history.

ENDNOTES

1. Himani Bannerji, "Popular Images of South Asian Women," *Parallelogramme*, April/May 1986, p. 17.
2. Marusia Bociurkiw, "Territories of the Forbidden: Lesbian Sex, Culture and Censorship," *Fuse*, April 1988, p. 27.
3. For reference see, Nancy Myron and Charlotte Bunch, *Lesbianism and the Women's Movement*. Baltimore: Diana Press, 1975; and, Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 5:4 (1980).

[FILM]

Representation Under Siege

THE MOVIE OF THE WEEK

Thom Fitzgerald and Andrew Ellis
1990 release

by Ronald Foley Macdonald

Thom Fitzgerald and Andrew Ellis's *The Movie of the Week* is an astonishingly ambitious \$35,000, 75-minute feature film that critically examines media representations while it tells the story of a young man, Matthew, and his relationship with his therapist, Brandy. The film creates a double narrative by pitting a harsh black-and-white reality against a colourful media fantasy, which echoes the dialogue of Matthew's evolving therapy.

Ellis and Fitzgerald are currently fourth-year students at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax. "Thom wrote the first version of the script when he was at Cambridge. Last year we met here at the college and were in the same film classes. He explained the script ideas to me. We joined the Atlantic Filmmakers' Co-operative, formed Arbitrary Productions, worked on some short films by other students and then began *The Movie of the Week*," said Ellis. "Originally it wasn't going to be so big. But we introduced the elements of media interruptions and found that they actually reinforced the main narrative. Media, mainly television of course, rarely holds your attention on one single, simple narrative. Rather, it constantly shifts perspective and intent with commercials, public service messages, plugs for upcoming shows. It's always barging in, interrupting, disrupting and massaging. That's what we tried to capture."

The Movie of the Week is punctuated by these ingenious re-creations, usually acted out by local performers Jordan Broadworth and Susan Jackson. To call them parodies may be to miss their point: it is difficult to parody something that has virtually no substance. The re-creations in *The Movie of the Week* are more like exercises in style. There are, however, some particularly faithfully constructed re-creations of 1930s and '40s melodramas. These are more heavily stylized and are clearly intended to question how we interpret representations of characters and their accepted relationships.

"Both Thom and I are heavy-duty moviegoers. I really don't watch that much television anymore. I just couldn't take it. Movies, however, are much more important in that they define behaviour. I often think of an experience I've just had as if I experienced it as a movie, or how it could be objectified visually. The main storyline in *The Movie of the Week* is partly autobiographical, and some of the experiences are very real."

Indeed, *The Movie of the Week* has an oddly realistic tone, which is sustained throughout the film. It is at once rigorously anti-romantic while maintaining an extremely subjective perspective. The main character's inability to distinguish temporal reality from media-mediated reality is reflected in the point of view, which never clearly delineates what is

real and what has been imagined. The great filmic tradition of Canadian documentary realism has been cleverly turned on its head: the gritty directness of hand-held cameras, mobile production and stark presentation all combine to increase our awareness of artifice. Representation, from ready-made TV ads, newscasts and game shows to the main narrative itself, is under siege in *The Movie of the Week*.

"At the college, as art students, we learned a critical perspective. As artists and gay men, we want to know why you don't see gays or other minorities adequately represented on TV or in film. When you see our main characters, Matthew and Brandy, or Matthew and Jonathan having a physical relationship, it's our intent to say, 'Why haven't you seen this before in this manner?'"

Any Hollywood production, or perhaps even mainstream Canadian production, might have difficulty with the straightforward depiction of gay sexuality. The visual code that is being violated, that of heterosexuality, is made more complicated by the violation of yet another code, that of the doctor-patient relationship. In conventional terms, the relationship between Matthew and Brandy would be either sensationalized or perverted. In Ellis and Fitzgerald's hands, it's made to seem normal.

"Our inexperience, I think, saved us. We didn't think there was any reason not to show it. We went on the presumption that this code of representation simply didn't exist. And lots of people told us all down the line that, no, you just can't do this and you can't show that. We found no adequate answer as to why not."

The Movie of the Week has received assistance from the Atlantic Filmmakers' Co-operative and The National Film Board of Canada. Andrew Ellis and Thom Fitzgerald are hoping to complete it for a summer release. ■

Ronald Foley Macdonald is a freelance writer and film programmer who lives in Halifax.

[EXHIBITION]

Let's Get Engaged

COMMITMENT

Paper Tiger Television,
Jamelie Hassan, David Hassall, Gran
Fury, Collier Schorr,
Laura Kipnis, Blair Robbins,
Mark Dion & William Schefferine.
Curated by Tom Folland
The Power Plant, Toronto
January 19 - February 25, 1990

by Andy Fabo

"Commitment" is a provocative title for an exhibition mounted on a site that is being held hostage by belligerent real estate developers who are demanding more condominiums as ransom for culture. The notion of confrontationally political work in this upscale venue seems incongruous but daring, considering the volatile context. Unfortunately, the reality did not live up to the promise and the exhibition materialized as an incoherent array with some bright spots of genuine political commitment.

Presented with this confused selection of work, I turned to the catalogue essay for guidance and learned that the show had a legitimate pedigree, as it was named after a 1962 essay by Theodor Adorno. However, Adorno was mostly an ornament to the text as Folland dangled the possibilities of Adorno's cultural theories before us and then snatched them away with a denial that there was an alignment of Adorno's position with that of any of the artists in the grouping. This was just as well since Adorno was very much against the polemics and "tendentiousness" that Folland seems to have had



Photo by Douglas Clark

"All people with AIDS are innocent," banner by Gran Fury.

in mind. Although no schematized explanation of his curatorial choices was offered, he did indicate some of the dilemmas and complexities that politically motivated artists must face.

I assume that the most relevant point in the Adorno essay for Folland was Adorno's condemnation of "a work of art that is content to be a fetish," because he prefaces his own essay with this quotation. However, Folland does not elaborate on what exactly is wrong with such fetishism. Is there a significant difference between sexual, religious, or artistic fetishism? Are any desirable and under what circumstances? What constitutes such fetishism in art, and how can a work of art escape such a negative fate? Because these questions are unanswered by Folland, I must draw my conclusions from his selections of artists' work. They indicate that photo-textual work, video, and work using appropriated pre-fabricated objects defy the dreaded category of the fetish while the handmade object, the drawing, or the painting cannot do so. The few painted pieces included function largely as perfunctory components to larger installations. The reality of the

situation in Canada, though, is that a lot of politically committed work is done in painting and drawing. To valorize work in electronic and photographic media and forsake more traditional media is to exclude such vital artists as Grace Channer, Buseje Bailey, Jane Ash Poitras, Joane Cardinal-Schubert and Carl Beam, artists who could have provided a more varied view of the multitude of issues facing us today and the numerous representational strategies available to elucidate them.

Surely Adorno's indictment of art as fetish does not preclude making work that is visually engaging in order to secure it a broader audience. Jamelie Hassan does exactly this in "Trilogy," a three-part installation that takes three Salman Rushdie novels (*Midnight's Children*, *Shame* and *Satanic Verses*) as points of departure.

Jamelie Hassan's work is always strongest when she places herself well within the frame, and this is borne out in the most compelling portion of the trilogy, the "Shame" installation. Two large and simply rendered gouache goddesses make up a backdrop along with two panels of text. One panel's text is a 12th century

Persian love poem that characterizes women as "perverse" and "deceitful." The other is the transcription of a dialogue between Hassan and a U.S. customs official. The dialogue begins with officious harassment because of her Arabic name and ends with his calling out to another officer to inquire if the female Pre-Columbian deity-figures that Hassan was returning with were pornographic. The confluence of racism, censorship and misogyny in this work, amplified by the autobiographical detailing, is powerful and disturbing.

However, the "Satanic Verses" installation has a generalizing effect that is rare in Hassan's work. Photographs of a bookburning of Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* in England are pitted against a wide assortment of books sleeved with "Satanic Verses" dustcovers. The implication that if one book is censored then any book could be censored ignores the specificity that is the most important element in the power-play of censorship. In spite of such occasional shortcomings, the maturity and political sophistication of Jamelie Hassan's work eclipses most of the other artists' contributions to this exhibition.

In contrast, the clumsiness of David Hassall's four installations dealing with AIDS has inadvertently damaging effects. While Ontario's Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Richard Schabas is calling for the quarantine of people with AIDS who continue to have sex (even with full disclosure and due protection), the "Commitment" show had a work that, by all appearances, seemed to endorse a view of the person with AIDS as a criminal, vampire-like predator, a vector of contagion to an "innocent general public."

Presumably, Hassall's intentions in his installations were to deal with the media spectacle around AIDS and the fears created by it. This gets misdirected due to a mismanagement of information. Toilet seats and doorknobs are featured in backlit stills. The only image of a real PWA (person with AIDS) is a pairing of frontal and profile mugshots. The impli-

cation of criminality is reinforced through anonymity by its use of a photographic negative. Still video images of body parts with tattoos that indicate HIV sero-positivity are overlaid with the text of William F. Buckley's rationale for tattooing HIV-positive people. PWAs, however, are not given voice in these installations, and alternative information is not provided to counter the misinformation promoted by the images. Hassall is counting on the public to be more informed than polls have indicated and is expecting the Power Plant audience, largely uninitiated to cultural theory, to discern his media critique.

The banner by Gran Fury proclaiming that "All people with AIDS are innocent" was mounted over the outside doors. It was so decontextualized that *The Globe and Mail's* art critic, John B. Mays, was able to feign incomprehension. This New York collective (associated with ACT-UP—the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) has a practice unlike that of Canadian artists, and a more in-depth, expository representation of their work would have gone a long way towards fleshing out the intent of this particular piece. Their strategies of political intervention into the public sphere (with T-shirts, buttons, transit ads, street posters and demonstration placards) around AIDS, reproductive rights and censorship issues provide a model for transforming theory into artistic practice that was certainly worth more serious consideration.

A similar aptness of strategy could be seen in Paper Tiger Television, a loose collective of American video producers who take advantage of Public Access, a censorship free channel on Cable TV. The walls were papered with pages from the local press and funky furniture was made from bundled newspapers to create an informal viewing room for their collection of videotapes. The collective is responsive to current news and debates, providing counter information and alternative views to the oppressively con-

trolled mainstream media. And, it uses humour and ingenuity to conquer the limitations of meagre production budgets.

While the two American collectives and Hassan make perfect sense in this exhibition, some of the other imports are quite inexplicable as there are more developed artists in the Toronto community doing stronger work on the same issues. Everywhere in this exhibition there were signs of the oversights of the curator. Too many conflicting audio works were placed in one room. While the catalogue repeatedly disdains the exclusionary world of the white heterosexual male, no works by artists of colour were featured. Next to an ecological piece was an energy-wasting seven-monitor work that could easily have exchanged six of the monitors for still photographs with no adverse affect to its content. An inadvertently reactionary piece that actually spoke of a white heterosexual male's inordinate fears was exhibited at a time when HIV-positive people were under attack and taking to the streets in Toronto in unprecedented numbers.

Increasingly, current art discourse asks artists to be more self-critical and to make this critique visible in their art. Curators, on the other hand, seldom publicly analyze their complicity in a power hierarchy and I have yet to see an exhibition that explores the nature of the power relationship between artist and curator. Folland may well have selected another New York collective, Group Material, to call into question his own complicity with these mechanisms. This group curates around specific cultural issues. The heterodoxy of their selections and their ability to access numerous communities would have been an indictment of increasingly narrow curatorial practices in Canada. ■

Andy Fabo is an artist working in painting, drawing and video and lives in Toronto.

[FILM]

Black History & Desire

LOOKING FOR LANGSTON

Isaac Julien

Distributed by Sankofa (London, U.K.)

by Molly Shinhat

Isaac Julien is a British filmmaker and a member of the Black film collective Sankofa. His filmography includes *Passion of Remembrance* (dir. with Maureen Blackwood, 1986) and *Looking For Langston* (1989), which was funded as an independent commission by Britain's Channel 4 for the gay and lesbian series *Out on Tuesday*. *FUSE* correspondent Molly Shinhat spoke to Julien when he was in Montreal for the gay and lesbian film and video festival *Image and Nation*.

FUSE: Clearly the aesthetics and politics of television were a consideration in the making of *Looking For Langston*. Do you feel that at some point this relationship with television will limit you?

JULIEN: People should take television seriously because of how many people see it. I don't think *Looking For Langston* fit successfully into Channel 4 aesthetically, but in terms of the series—it was one of the highlights. I think in relation to there being a number of Black issues, being a part of that series was important. In terms of how I think television or televisual forms dominate the way that people make things, I've really gone against the grain of trying to make something that looked like television. I wanted *Looking For Langston* to look like cinema. So that

was our emphasis—to make it a cinematic film rather than a tele-visual film-text. I would argue that our films are of a quality that is different from most of the more journalistic films that one would see, and that's something that we want to build on.

FUSE: What was it that motivated you to make a film not only about Langston Hughes but specifically about Black gay desire?

JULIEN: It's a project that I wanted to do for several years, but it was a very difficult project to imagine, at first, because the resources were very scarce. I didn't want to make a straightforward docu-

mentary. To talk about Black gay desire one had to include fantasy, erotic images. To a certain extent I think one can talk about desire without including erotic images. . . all those questions are really complicated to deal with. I did writing at first with Kobena Mercer for *Ten-8* magazine and we had lots of discussions. Talking about the construction of Black masculinities, the politics of Black masculinity and Black gay identities is, in a sense, an on-going project. *Looking For Langston* was very important in relation to talking about myself, and the historical importance of a homosexual Black contribution to Black culture. Those were the kind of things I was interested in.

FUSE: The sense I get from the film is that you're trying to reconstruct a history in terms of lifestyle in some way. How did you go about researching that and what sources did you use?

JULIEN: In talking about the construction of Black homosexual identities, or Black gay identity, it was very difficult to really capture historical information because archives don't exist. Initially the research took place in relationship to reading his poetry and several books about the Harlem Renaissance and trying, during my trips back and forth to New York, to interview people. . . Arnold Ramper-



Photo courtesy Sankofa

sad, who wrote *The Life of Langston Hughes*, Essex Hemphill and Hilton Aries (a lover of Langston Hughes) who had worked for Black art historian Owen Dodson.

People didn't want to speak to me because, first of all, they didn't know where I was coming from—I was Black and English. Some of the people that were very close to him, they really didn't want to talk about the kind of subjects that I wanted to talk about in relationship to the film. In a sense it's a generational thing there, where people don't want to talk about their own biographies in relation to their sexual identities because the price of that is too great. At one time I thought of trying to use interviews with people that were kind of like talking heads, interspersed in the film. That just took it too much away from the things I wanted to do artistically so I decided to use a voice-over to hold all that information.

In terms of the research and what one sees in the film—there's absolutely no comparison. The research took two years, and the film is 40 minutes. It's very difficult—you have to talk about what happened over decades in two lines. I really learned a lot in doing it. . .

FUSE: Did you decide at the beginning not to make a film that could be read in any way as an historical documentary—I mean in terms of dates and events that actually happened in Hughes's life?

JULIEN: I think so because I didn't actually want to make a film about Langston Hughes's life as such. What I wanted to do was talk about the way in which I thought Hughes stood in symbolically for me as a Black cultural icon which was basically an icon that meant something else. It meant the impossibility of a homosexual or gay desire being articulated through Black cultural icons. It was that kind of phenomenon that I was interested in because it's symbolic in relationship to questions around homosexual

identity or gay desire in the Black community, or even within the Black academy, being synonymous. Those two categories are incompatible. So, in a way, Hughes represented that for me. I think also in relationship to the way the Black community is to questions around AIDS, for example, at the end of the '80s, similar problems are built up, because a lot of bisexuality exists in the Black communities. It exists precisely because of these kinds of situations, scenarios, where people can't really articulate or say in a more straightforward way who they are—or what they do. That's why, in a sense, the film couldn't really be a straightforward documentary because it's so much around ambivalence.

FUSE: I guess that transition is evident when three-quarters of the way through the film the music changes and it's a contemporary situation, right?

JULIEN: Absolutely. I wanted to transgress between the past and the present, go backwards and forwards. Shooting the film in black and white helped me do that. The archive sequences, and the reconstructed sequences would have some kind of continuity.

FUSE: And you'd have to think to distinguish between them. . .

JULIEN: Yeah, but also you'd have to come to some conclusion about maybe those situations or those two times being the same as well.

FUSE: A lot of the debate about *Looking For Langston* focuses on the fact that it's a very stylized film, a very aesthetically beautiful film. Aside from what you've told me about wanting to make a film articulating, expressing, locating a Black gay desire—what led you to make these particular aesthetic decisions?

JULIEN: What I wanted to do was somehow parody some of the photographs of Van der Zee. There's one book called *The Harlem Book of the Dead*, which Owen Dodson wrote the text for, where we see Black people in coffins. They're photographs that were taken of people before they were buried, but they're very beautiful photographs. They could almost be described as camp, in the sense of an aesthetic preoccupation—very florid. I find them fascinating. In a way it's that preoccupation around a Black sensibility around aesthetics, almost a Black working class aesthetic as well. . . Also borrowing, from the work of George Platt Lyons, a photographer from the '40s who did some very interesting photographs around the male body which had very heavy homosexual overtones. Photographic discourse was something that I really wanted to explore in *Looking For Langston*.

Those aesthetic preoccupations blended with the desire to eroticize and make sensuous Black bodies. Of course, that carries a number of connotations that are very heavily anchored in a racist and fetishistic discourse because that is precisely the domain in which a number of Black bodies have been fixed. Indeed the Black body is fixed within a number of discourses—which is a problem. But I think the film was trying to prize out a certain audience—making possible the eroticization of a number of images for Black gay men that are not racist or fetishistic in the same way that Mapplethorpe's photographs are.

FUSE: How have Black gay audiences received the film in Britain?

JULIEN: A whole set of other questions are brought up, which are not the kind that are discussed if it's shown to a white audience. A lot of issues are brought up around the light-skinned/dark-skinned dichotomy, and challenges or criticisms are made in terms of my use of light-skinned Black men.

Photo courtesy Sankofa



For me, the criticisms around that are usually based around an essentialist notion of what "real" Black subjects are. I don't believe in an essentialist notion around Blackness equating skin colour. . . The Harlem Renaissance and the people that were a part of that movement were invariably light-skinned to a certain extent because they'd be middle-class Blacks, and middle-class Blacks are usually light-skinned. There's a whole politics there. In the film that's not articulated, but I try to bring it up with "Beautiful Black Men," the song by Blackberri.

FUSE: What about the scene where we see the dark Black man look down because he's getting a series of down-trip looks from a white man?

JULIEN: I'm basically trying to describe what happens when you walk into gay bars, or when you walk into a bookshop or whatever—where people are trying to cruise each other or check each other out. There are a number of things that happen which are in themselves to do with a certain amount of disavowal from white subjects, a certain amount of disavowal in Black subjects. In a way what gets built up in that sequence produces a

real tension. There's something that I think probably happens there around desire and displacement. It's about the way in which there is not this communication between Black men in those spaces or the way in which there is this imposition, where there might be either disapproval, rejection. It's all about the way we inter-react interpersonally, racially speaking.

FUSE: Is it also about the individual territories of the Black men as well? That the small power they have may be in the fact that they are Black and read as exotic?

JULIEN: It's quite complex, and at the same time it's simple, because it's just to do with a number of gazes and looks. There's a whole set of implications in relation to those looks, which you can read on several levels. They are re-duplicated in society in terms of power structures. There are other things going on there as well to do with the way racism works, to a certain extent, in white society. It's also to do with the way that gets internalized and re-duplicated in the way Black men relate to each other.

FUSE: We've talked about the response to the film by Black gay audiences in Britain. How have Black gay audiences in the United States responded?

JULIEN: I was told by Essex Hemphill, who organized a screening in Washington, where there was a 98 per cent Black gay audience, that it was incredible. Some people said that they were really thankful that they were alive to see a film like this. Other people brought up the skin colour issue. I think Langston Hughes has a different currency in North America than in Europe, per se. Here he really represents a Black cultural icon that is fixed in a particular way. The reviews I've got from Black gay writers, such as the one that was in the *City Sun* in New York, were really interesting, really dealing with it at a far more sophisticated level than the reviews that I got from white critics in London. It's been received in a far more thoughtful way to a certain degree, but it's also been highly controversial within the Black community.

FUSE: In terms of the other work you've done with Sankofa, and the response *Looking for Langston* has received in the United States, particu-

larly from Black gay audiences, do you feel that, in some sense, this is the first film that really speaks to this audience in particular?

JULIEN: It's a film that has been made with a certain audience in mind—which is a Black gay audience. That's where it's speaking from. That's where my voice, to a certain extent, is from, but it is my voice, so in that sense it is not representative. What I've tried to do is make a number of links within the Black diaspora because I'm from Britain—Essex Hemphill lives in Washington, D.C., Blackberri lives in San Francisco. They've passed through Europe, through London, and when they've been there I've tried to make connections—but it is not representative. It's important that that's acknowledged. As for the way it's been received, in relation to our other films, I think it's because it's about a Black American poet that it's had much more of an impact in the American market than our previous films, even though our previous films have also always had a connection with different Black audiences... and indeed different art audiences as well because of the way in which we make our films—our aesthetic and filmic preoccupations.

We've been pleased with the response, but you're right to point out that our films have been dealing with these issues in a number of different ways. There is a kind of continuity there.

FUSE: Do you think that *Looking for Langston* is the first film you've made that would appeal to the Black gay community as a more entertaining film as well?

JULIEN: In terms of its structure it's not as experimental as some of the other films that we've made, but at the same time it is. It's precisely because of the way the film is constructed and some of the avant-garde techniques that are used in it, pro-filmic devices that are used in

constructing it as a text, that bring different audiences of interest to it as well, i.e. a white audience. When I say a "white audience" I'm being specific—I mean an art house audience. In some ways that becomes another problem, because one doesn't want only that kind of audience to see the work. At the same time one doesn't want the work to be... just to be boxed into a certain space. I think in North America that's something that people really enjoy doing because of the segregated politics, cultural territories that are demarcated in a particular way—this is



Photo courtesy Sankofa

Black; this is white; this is gay; this is... etc., etc. I don't think I can just say that I'm more concerned about what Black people think than what white people think. Both audiences for me are important. It's been very interesting to see how some white gay men have responded to the film, especially the bits around Robert Mapplethorpe.

FUSE: I know that at a screening I was at someone asked, "Did you not feel that you were actually perpetuating what Mapplethorpe was doing in using his photographs?"

JULIEN: I don't think for a moment that I was perpetuating what Mapplethorpe was doing. What one witnesses in those

kinds of questions is really the film being used as a kind of alibi to repress something else. If one directs that question to the actual white gay man that's asking it, I think they're threatened by those sections in the film. They're made uncomfortable, maybe have to ask themselves some other questions. Obviously, what one doesn't witness in Mapplethorpe's work is subjectivity... You've entered into a fantasy of what white men think about Black men.

FUSE: Can you talk about the voice-over at that point in the film?

JULIEN: The poem that goes under that bit is by Essex Hemphill called "If his name was Mandingo," and it starts off with, "It would be coincidence if he had a mane, a face, a mind. If he's not hard on, he's hard up. It doesn't matter. Either way—you want him." It's all about how he witnesses the way in which interracial relationships or white-Black relationships, that to a certain extent Black men are fetishized. It very clearly articulates what's happening in those images.

FUSE: Can you talk about some of the problems you experienced with Hughes's estate and with copyright?

JULIEN: The Hughes estate didn't like the film—and that's where all the problems around copyright come in and the way which I think that the copyright has been used as a form of censorship. We got permission to use the Hughes poems from British publishers in Britain. We didn't have the copyright to use the poems in the film version of *Looking for Langston* that we had for America. So when we approached the estate and showed them the film—because PBS was interested in broadcasting it—they refused to give copyright permission, even though we were ready to pay for it, on the grounds that they didn't like the film. They thought that Langston Hughes was being constructed into a gay icon, and that basically

the kind of issues that we are talking about in the film, in a Black gay context, are very problematic for them. That then meant that we'd have to change the film, so we did a second version so that we could show it in America, but we still had two bits of Hughes in the film. The clips were, as far as we were concerned, public domain.

The archive footage of Langston Hughes aesthetically and structurally were so important to the film as a whole that if we took those bits out, we'd destroy it. We basically changed the film as much as we could to please the estate. Obviously that wasn't enough because at the New York Film Festival, we realized that they (the estate) weren't pleased with those changes. In fact they wanted to try to take the New York Film Festival to court. We thought the film fell under "fair copyright usage," which is an American law that allows you to use poems in quotation. Since two of the quotations were in fact whole poems, we had to show the film with the two sections—more or less the beginning and the end where Hughes appears—silent. We actually had to take the sound off.

The present situation is that we now show the film with only the first bit of sound silenced in it, but what that does is make the whole copyright issue—censorship issue—part and parcel of the film. I think the film works as well in that sense. I'm not happy with it... but I think it's important that the film be shown.

This was an obvious case where copyright was being used to censor what the film was actually trying to say and do. I just wanted to bring up some of the nuances and complexities of how I see Langston Hughes, and how other Black artists live their lives, and how they may still live their lives, because of the impossibility of having any kind of homosexual or gay identity, how those things are incompatible with Blackness. ■

Molly Shinhat is a freelance journalist living in Montreal.

Chilean fruit boxes: detail of installation.

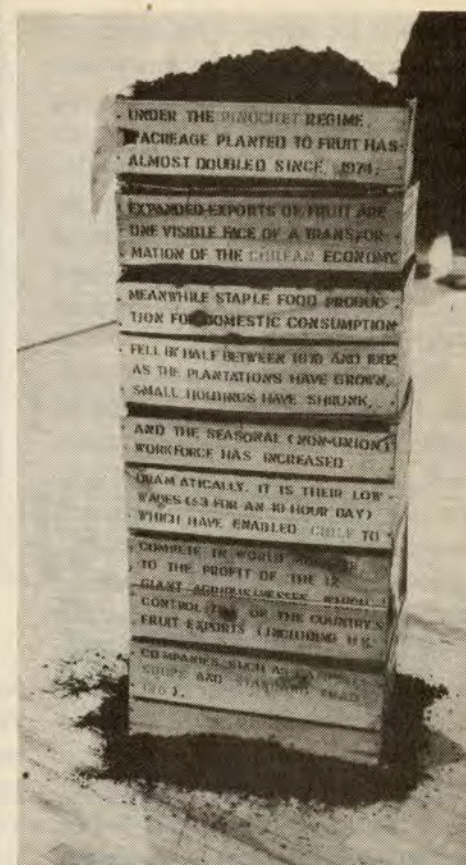


Photo courtesy the artist

[EXHIBITION]

Food for Thought

THE GLOBAL MENU

Freda Guttman

Oboro Gallery, Montréal

February 17 - March 18, 1990

by Salah Dean Hassan

Between 1986 and 1988, Freda Guttman toured Canada with the multi-media installation *Guatemala: The Road To War*, in which she first brought together her interests as a political activist and her artistic practices. For that project, the bonding of the two realms occurred as much in the organization of the project as in the installation itself. From city to city, numerous political and cultural events were programmed in different venues through the collective efforts of community-based organizations and the artist. This initial experience provided, in large part, the conceptual and material basis for *The Global Menu* exhibition which, like the Guatemala show, is reinforced by the support of international solidarity groups and local committees.

The process of developing and successfully executing projects that create

links between community-based groups is at the core of Guttman's art. The organizations that mobilized their support behind the *Global Menu* (both in Toronto when it was shown at A Space in October 1989 as well as in Montréal at Oboro) identify with the project; they see themselves as—and indeed are—part of it. Similarly, Guttman inscribes her exhibition within the field of ongoing struggles. In many ways, it is necessary to view the exhibition and the corresponding events that take place outside of the gallery or outside of its regular hours (a weekly film series at the NFB, a video screening at Cinema Parallele, a slide show on the Philippines, a benefit concert, a benefit dinner, a tour of supermarkets, and lectures) as elements which constitute a whole. One event supports the other, touching different milieus and individu-

als so that the impact of the project extends beyond the relatively insular context of an artist-run gallery. The strong turnout for the opening at Oboro, the overwhelming number of visits to the gallery and the regular attendance at the other events indicate the effectiveness of this type of collective organizing for which the artwork serves as an important point of departure.

The series of works (a video composed of five segments, seven small installations, a major installation, book-work and place mats) which form *The Global Menu* examine issues concerning the political economy of food on an international scale. In each piece, Guttman simultaneously looks at the modes of production and consumption prevailing in the third world and how they relate to North American patterns of consumption.

The major installation, "Twelve Families in Sugarland: The Island of Negros, the Philippines," is based on documentation gathered during the artist's visit to the Philippines in 1987. In a reconstructed shantytown-like shack a series of black and white photographs, accompanied by captions, quotations and a recorded interview with one of the farm workers on a sugarcane plantation, illustrate how the appropriation of land by wealthy land-owners has resulted in the disenfranchisement of Filipino farm workers. The interview allows this Filipino to represent himself, to assume a space that he and his community have been denied; and in doing so he reveals his profound political awareness of a system of oppression that not only weighs on his family, but also extends beyond Negros Island, and touches the first world as well.

"Because, as we really see the situation, it's not only us here in the third world, but maybe in other countries, they have also the same problem. Only the level of oppression is quite different and the form of oppression is quite different. Maybe the oppression is not quite seen there."



Aero commercializes: detail of video installation.

Photo courtesy the artist

"Twelve Families" is a direct and intimate portrayal of how the lives of several families are affected by agribusiness policy in third world countries. A smaller piece, which uses Chilean fruit boxes filled with earth and covered with text detailing Pinochet's "successful" transformation of Chile into a fruit basket for North America, works more as a metaphor. The work suggests that as the land is used largely to produce goods for export, the very soil in which the fruits grow is the true commodity. The text also contrasts the radical increases in the quantity of food produced for export with the decreases in production for local consumption and the development of a sub-proletariat in the farming industry. The boxes and soil take on the macabre quality of a coffin and grave site; the life of a Chilean farm worker is worth only as much as the quantity of fruit he or she can pick.

Three works installed at the far end of the gallery employ a variety of techniques to represent North American super-marketing, however, each one explores different issues. The first installation assumes the form of a conveyor belt carrying miniature grocery boxes brimming with commodities generally associated with third world agricultural production: oranges, rice, cows, coffee, co-

conut, tea, pineapples, coco, bananas and sugar. Protruding from each box is a paper wrapping with descriptions of the ingenious farming and harvesting techniques used by the Lacondones of the Chiapas in southern Mexico and the Kayapo who reside in Brazil's tropical rain forest. This piece has a playful quality to it and stands in contrast to the distressing representation of supermarket bins filled with tropical fruits. A series of counter-shaped light boxes displays images of pineapples, bananas, tomatoes, mangoes, and passion fruit as scenes of military oppression in Chile flash across the corresponding backdrop. Subtly, a "neutral" female voice reads off a list of fruits and their origin: "Mayan melons from Guatemala, Emperor grapes from Chile, nectarines from Chile, pineapples from Hawaii, tomatoes from Mexico, pink honeydew from Honduras. . ." and on and on.

Equally disturbing are the adjacent photos and captions documenting the price and quality of food available in Canadian Inuit communities. Fruit, vegetables and milk, generally considered "essential elements for a balanced and nutritious diet," are outrageously expensive due to shipping costs based on weight. Consequently, it is cheaper and more appealing for some Inuit—particularly younger

people—to buy junk food. One of the captions superimposed on a photo of a two-litre milk carton (priced at \$6.15) reads, "Would you pay \$1.80 for a chocolate bar or \$1.25 for a frozen, bruised or even rotten apple."

The video installation stands apart, in terms of its physical place in the gallery and in its execution. The monitor, sitting on a dining-room table, is flanked by miniature plastic fruit and crowned with a papier-mâché pineapple. Each of the five video segments uses food commercials (Delmonte corn, Raisin Bran, Nescafé, McCain's frozen chocolate cake, Aero chocolate bar), and in three, stock footage of political and working conditions in third world countries is incorporated. Here the comfortable setting of the North American dining room serves as the site for demonstrating the grotesque marketing techniques that successfully seduce many, and establish the dominant modes of consumption.

While most of the works use technologically-based mediums (photography, recordings, video, light boxes, colour xerox), the mise-en-scène generally has a rough edge to it. The contrast that emerges evokes the distinct material realities of the first and third worlds. There is a calculated use of the mediums, but it does not distract the viewer from the central ideas in the work. Rather Guttman tries to fold style, form and content together in order to arrive at a politically and visually coherent representation of the subject matter. As with several other artists who view their work as a legitimate vehicle for expressing political ideas, Guttman strives to remove ambiguities and to reach the widest audience possible. Clearly she wants to raise often ignored or avoided domestic and third world political issues. Food is the unavoidable connection between "them" and "us" and Guttman uses it to impinge on our political consciousness. ■

Salah Dean Hassan lives in Montreal where he is active in international solidarity work.



THE ISSUE IS 'ISM: Women of Colour Speak Out

**Nila Gupta and Makeda Silvera, managing editors
Sister Vision (Black Women and Women of Colour Press)
Reprinted from Fireweed, 16
Toronto, 1989.**

The Issue is 'Ism: Women of Colour Speak Out is a reprint of the 1983 Issue 16 of *Fireweed*, a feminist quarterly. Although every issue of *Fireweed* is cherished by its left feminist and anti-racist audience, Issue 16 was truly a landmark. As the Publisher's Foreword tells us, "It was the first time in Canadian feminist literature that women of colour collectively came together to talk in a single anthology." Although seven years have elapsed in the meantime, the writings collected in the volume make a powerful impact because the issues they speak about remain as relevant in the '90s as they were in the early '80s: "racism, sexism, classism, imperialism and other 'isms."

[BOOKS]

We Were Never Lost

by Arun Mukherjee

The priority given to "racism" in the above list and the coupling of "sexism" with three other "isms" identify the divergence between mainstream feminism and the one espoused by women of colour. The guest editorial collective cite two main purposes behind their work: "first, to reach out to women of colour and second, to educate white feminists." The theoretical pieces in the volume, particularly the editorial, "We Were Never Lost," and the transcribed conversation among several women of colour, "We Appear Silent to People Who are Deaf to What We Say," analyse the predominant differences that have led to a deep divide in the feminist movement along the colour line.

One gathers from the theoretical articles in the volume that women of colour do not have the luxury to focus exclusively on sexism because racism is an even greater menace for them and their communities as a whole. The "white sister" is chided and admonished for her exclusionary practices which leave women of colour out in the cold. She is rapped for her theoretical perspectives

which focus single-mindedly on "sexism," leaving the other "isms" and, consequently, women of colour, out of her analysis. The women of colour anthologised in this volume often speak of the struggle of their "people." As Dionne Brand says: "Any immigrant woman/woman of colour analyzing her situation in the world has to analyze it beyond the point of being a woman, because there are other people who are in the same condition and some of them are men. We cannot analyze the world as though men of colour are not oppressed too, because that way of analyzing the world gives us no way out of it." This stance, we are told, has been unacceptable to white feminists who are accused here of being unaware of their "white skin privilege."

Indeed, despite a flood of material that has come out during the last seven years on the issue of racism in the feminist movement, white feminists in Canada will find much in this volume that is unique. For one, most of the material on women of colour that gets circulated and prescribed in Women's Studies courses originates in Britain or the United States and one needs to do a lot of stretching and pulling to apply it to the Canadian situation. On that score, this volume fills a glaring gap. Many women of colour have commented that relying on British or U.S. materials suggests to the readers that such problems don't exist in Canada. *The Issue is 'Ism*, when put on reading lists of Women's Studies courses, will provide a healthy corrective to that attitude and force the reader to take cognizance of the situation.

Secondly, the questions raised in the volume gain even greater urgency this time around because many people would want to know what anti-racist activities were undertaken by white feminists during the seven years since these criticisms were first uttered. The recent split at the Women's Press and its establishment of

anti-racist guidelines generated a lot of public soul searching. Similarly, one is beginning to see some changes in Women's Studies curricula although we still have much distance to cover. However, it is encouraging that the issue of "race" is gaining ground in the construction of feminist theory, thanks to the unceasing vigilance of women of colour.

The "educating" of white feminists is, however, only part of the task the editorial collective set out for itself. The other was to "reach out to women of colour," "women outside the so-called feminist network." Collected here are the voices of Canadian women of colour from diverse backgrounds. They speak of their concerns through various forms of creative and theoretical writing. The subjects, such as Native women's struggle against the racist and sexist Indian Act, the exploitation experienced by the East Indian farm workers and Caribbean domestic workers, the quadruple jeopardy faced by lesbians of colour, and the detailed discussion of discomfort and disagreement of women of colour with the exclusionary nature of dominant feminist theory and practise, cover a terrain that continues to be ignored by those who have the power to be listened to. These writings are about women of colour recovering their past, retaining their cultural identity, resisting assimilation, struggling against racism, challenging mainstream feminism and dealing with the patriarchal values of their own communities.

Many of the writers anthologised here, such as Himani Bannerji, Dionne Brand, Claire Harris, Suniti Namjoshi and Makeda Silvera, are quite well known by now. However, the volume also provides a venue for the voices of women who cannot write by transcribing their speech. "Profiles of Working Class East Indian Women" by Prabha Khosla and "Silenced" by Makeda Silvera allow us to "hear" women who form the underbelly

of the racist, sexist and classist Canadian society.

One cannot but remember the recent discussion of the racism of the publication industry and how hard it is for non-white writers to get published in Canada while reading *The Issue is 'Ism*. This reprint, despite having been published seven years ago, remains the only anthology of its kind. While invaluable, I hope that *The Issue is 'Ism* will be succeeded by new collections of writing by Canadian women of colour.

Unfortunately, this volume does not include new writing that might help us understand the developments that have occurred during the last seven years. Perhaps a new "Introduction" by a member of the editorial collective would have helped give readers this historical perspective. For example, it would have been useful to have information on the Amended Indian Act. While additional information can be provided in the classroom setting, one cannot expect all readers to be conversant with the course events have taken since 1983.

In its totality, the volume presents a stiff challenge to the modes of white feminist theorising that do not take race and class into account. It concertedly brings out the conscious and unconscious racism of such theories and how they hurt people of colour. Through both its theoretical and creative writings, it points out the "silences" in dominant feminist discourse and allows the "silenced" to speak. I commend Sister Vision Press for reprinting this historic *Fireweed* issue. One hopes that this time around it will create an even greater impact and reach a wider audience than it did when it was originally published. ■

Arun Mukherjee teaches post-colonial literatures at York University. She is the author of *Towards an Aesthetic of Opposition* (Williams-Wallace, 1988).

[BOOKS]

Blips • Dips & Twists

by Clive Robertson

SULTANS OF SLEAZE: Public Relations and the Media

Joyce Nelson
Between the Lines
Toronto, 1989.

Feudalism: any society or social group... based upon inequality and the privileged position of a social, political or economic dynasty.

Fontana Dictionary
of Modern Thought

A few years ago in the middle of a public debate about the rights of independent producer access to publicly-funded TV Ontario, an exasperated executive producer/employee retorted: "Why pick on us, why not go after the private broadcasters—they're public too." In a lexicon of media-originated euphemisms and oxymorons the executive made the correct, albeit inverted, alignment: there is no such thing as a public broadcaster, that is, a broadcaster operating with both direct

and indirect public monies who, sector by sector, can offer fair representation particularly in the politically sensitive areas of news and public affairs programming.

Such a mandate would require broadcasters to distinguish between the general public and the "commercial" public (read, "investing" public), to make investigative reporting the norm instead of the exception and to continuously challenge the governments of the day.

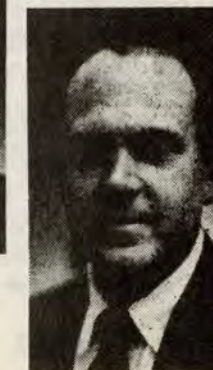
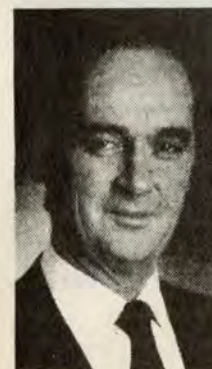
In the late '60s, through accident of time and place, my father took part in the first French language educational TV programming in Alberta and wrote the study/proposals for two provincial educational TV corporations: Access TV in Alberta, and (the now defunct) SaskMedia in Saskatchewan. Discussing the beginning shifts to "infotainment" in TV news in the mid-'70s, he told me how quickly the educational TV networks dumped their original community-based mandates and licensing promises in favour of a CBC-inspired autocratic structure.

Like many other cultural sectors, the CBC doesn't know how to address issues

of "accountability" and, to be fair, they are under fire from the government, the corporate sector, labour and intellectuals. While ideological warfare from the right—free trade, introduction of a value-added tax, Meech Lake without inclusive rights for women and Native peoples and the dismantling of social programmes—has set the political agenda, the CBC, the one public institution which could have made a difference, had essentially been voyaging deep into "neutral" space.

The CBC programme that acts as the flag of the public broadcasting flagship has to be *The Journal*. With its *Star Trek* set, updated every few seasons, its isolated crew looks out of its chroma-keyed windows into the news galaxy. Just like the original TV sci-fi series, emotion, plots and scripts are mannered and often morally driven. Occasionally the Captain and senior members of her crew visit other planets and asteroids where it is they who appear more alien than Earthling.

Over the past several years we have watched Barbara Frum acting the roles of Governor-General in the St. Lawrence Hall free-trade debate and European royalty in her tacky power-dressed visits to private, overcrowded Moscow homes. Perhaps one of the most disturbing episodes was Frum as psychiatrist following the Montreal massacre. Disarming her guest Ann McGrath (chair of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women's sub-committee on Violence Against Women) and McGrath's right to re-affirm feminism and its political



groups, Frum interjected, "Are you permanently scarred by that event? Does one ever fully recover?"

Sultans of Sleaze is Joyce Nelson's third back-to-back book following *The Colonized Eye: Re-Thinking the Grierson Legend* (1988) and *The Perfect Machine: TV in a Nuclear Age* (1987). While not exactly a trilogy, the three books usefully overlap common areas of content and historical context. What is surprising, given the topicality of her subject matter, is that the books are a result of 20 years of research. Nelson, who quit a job teaching film studies in 1976, began independently producing a number of feature-length radio documentaries for CBC Radio's *Ideas* programme. These included the 10-hour "Television: A Surrogate World" (1977), "Trips and Transformations" (1981) on the international tourist industry, "Television and Narrative" (1981) and, in hindsight, the prophetic, "The Selling of Companies and Countries" (1982). In the acknowledgements section of *Sultans of Sleaze*—aside from thanking Geraldine Sherman, former *Ideas* executive producer, for a productive seven-year relationship—Nelson answers the begging question of how a "free-lance writer" obtains so much first-person evidence: by flashing a CBC press card.



Nestlé Enterprises Ltd. announces the formation of a Canadian Advisory Board of Directors which includes (from left to right) Claude Bruneau (President of Sanpalo Investment Corp.); Pat Delbridge (consumer and community-based advocacy); Allan Gottlieb (publisher of *Saturday Night* magazine, Chairman of the Canada Council, former Canadian Ambassador to U.S.); Louise Lambert Legacé (consulting dietician, writer on child nutrition); Anne Lindsay (journalist and consultant on nutritional matters); and pollster Angus Reid.

SULTANS OF SLEAZE opens with the chapter "The Image Brokers" and the "grass-roots monitoring" strategies suggested by the ad agency Ogilvy & Mather in a confidential report titled: "Pro-active Neutralization: Nestlé's Recommendations Regarding the Infant Formula Boycott." (Their many products include Nescafe, Taster's Choice, Carnation, Libby's and Stouffers frozen dinners). [CR]

"Bad news bear" left economists have always reminded reductionists that capitalism is not monolithic. Similarly, and in a sense more ominously, contemporary cultural theorists have suggested that we accept a shift into a "hyperreality" where notions of truth, reference and what, in non-agreement, Linda Hutcheon terms the "non-cultural real" have ceased to exist. Nelson refers to this dilemma on the dedication page of her book by quoting from Daniel J. Boorstin's *The Image*: "We are the most illusioned people on earth. Yet we dare not become disillusioned, because our illusions are the very house in which we live."

As for the reminder of a need for re-assessment of political strategy, in the chapter, "The 'Greening' of Establishment PR: Mind Pollution on the Rise," Nelson relays a warning on the corporate co-optation of the environment movement written by Kirkpatrick Sale for *Mother Jones*: "Environmentalists, finally, are not successful even on their own terms in protecting the wilderness, in stopping the onrush of industrial devastation. They are so caught up in compromise that they're actually going backwards."

How is it that for all our volunteerism and activism, we appear to be "going backwards"? Why is it, knowing that the

"break-up" of the Eastern bloc should result in a populist re-evaluation of capitalism, that we remain wary. Isn't it encouraging to know that the Environics Research group last year found that the most important problem confronting Canadians was the environment. The year before that, another nation-wide attitudinal survey concluded that 83 per cent of Canadians ranked the environment as "very important" and 89 per cent believed that private industry does not contribute enough to solving environmental problems. The stats are indeed encouraging, but as the focus of Nelson's book makes clear: it is the *messenger* that is the problem. Democracy still exists in its formal procedural tradition, but the new virus of public relations/poll-taking/unlimited advocacy spending has all but overtaken its function.

Sultans of Sleaze is a series of interlocking essays including: "The Image Brokers," "The Time of the Hangman," "Handling the Legitimacy Gap," "The Power of the Pollsters," "Multinational Free Lunch" and "The 'Greening' of Establishment PR."

The chapter on pollsters best reveals Nelson's ability to expose a behind-the-scenes view of the "consciousness industry." Nelson traces a history back to the invention in 1906 of the press release by an American, Ivy Lee, as a way of creating the news. It started and continues to be the basic tool to turn a corporate and/or a government mishap into a positive act. By 1940, it has been estimated that 50 per cent of the reported news in newspapers and on radio was generated from press-releases sent out by public relations departments and firms. Nelson writes: "The PR tactic also fits in with one of the prevailing conventions of news: that rectifying 'misinformation' is not considered a news story."

If public opinion does not accept the "persona" of a government or corporation the threat to their domination is known as a "legitimacy gap." This problem is outlined by Prakesh Sethi, author of

Advocacy Advertising and Large Corporations. Nelson quotes Sethi who shows how the problem is solved by two major communications strategies:

"One is to change public expectations more in line with institutional performance. For example, if the public thinks the oil companies are making too much money, one of the ways oil companies could deal with that is simply to educate the public by demonstrating that they are not indeed making too much money. The gap would be narrowed because then the expectation and public performance would have been brought closer together. . . . Another way is to change the symbolism of corporate performance to meet public expectations. 'Yes, we are making lots of money, but look what we are doing with that money: we are investing it in oil exploration, etc.' This is changing the symbolism because you really haven't made any less or more profit than you were before. You're simply changing the public's perception of what profit is. The corporate performance itself hasn't changed. . . if neither of these strategies work, then you really do try to change your performance to meet society's expectations."

The whole purpose of PR then is never to have to use the third strategy.

In the first two decades of this century, the PR profession quickly developed its various branches, among them labour relations, government relations (now called Public Affairs) and media relations. In both *Sultans of Sleaze* and the preceding Grierson book, Nelson documents how Canada's Labour Minister, William Lyon Mackenzie King, was employed along with Ivy Lee by the Rockefeller family to help develop company unions and mastermind media relations.

On this continent, the cosy relationship between the state "captains of industry" has remained constant since the 19th century. "In Canada," Nelson writes, "much of the same executive personnel ran the Hudson's Bay Co., the Grand



William Lyon Mackenzie King.

Trunk Railway, the Bank of Montreal, and the Canadian government." Giant corporations were constructed to avoid the "instability" of market forces and the new ideology gained speed once the realization that propaganda used for the "total effort" of World War II could be re-adapted for corporate and later government advantage via the press conference, the photo opportunity, the pre-arranged interview and the press tour. The media still deems such traditions neutral, although their main purpose, according to Nelson, is to provide the media with reportable events so that it won't "have to go out and find something."

In 1966 the Pearson government killed the CBC's investigative programme *The World Has Seven Days* and a Royal Commission was struck the following year as a result of a CBC documentary, *Air of Death*. The Commission's focus was not air-pollution "but to determine whether or not the programme had shown bias." The '60s generation and their suspicion of "bullshit" created a crisis for capitalists who wished to continue their "manufacturing of consent." So began media-grooming for PR spokesmen, corporate executives and politicians alike. When this didn't produce the required results there began a flurry of attacks on the press itself and, from the early '70s,

the purchase of advocacy advertising. Mobil Oil's PR budget in 1981 rose to \$25-million. In 1980, U.S. corporate PR departments in total spent \$1-billion a year on advocacy advertising.

In 1980, *The Globe & Mail's* new advocacy revenue accounted for 20 per cent of its advertising within one year. *The Globe & Mail* campaign slogan read: "It's remarkable how often people react in righteous indignation when a newspaper story does not reflect their own view. Fortunately the freedom of the press allows for a response through the time-honoured tradition of letters to the editor. But there's another aspect of the freedom of the press that for too long was ignored. That's freedom to advocate a point of view through the use of corporate advertising." *Saturday Night* followed suit and by 1981 the Government of Canada was spending \$100-million on "information," a sum that reached \$266-million in deficit-cutting 1989.

As Nelson documents, the attacks on the press worked. In 1981, first CBS's *Sixty Minutes* caved-in followed by ABC's *20/20* both having allowed and invited on-air rebuttals. In Canada, a rash of new business publications and TV shows like *Venture* helped to satisfy corporate desires for "positive" reporting.

By 1976, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled

that "political candidates could spend unlimited personal money on their campaigns, and that 'unaffiliated groups' could finance their pet candidates without any restrictions on spending—as long as their activity was not authorized by the candidate's official party organization." In Canada, in 1984, the ultra-conservative National Citizens' Coalition won an amendment to the Election's Act (arguing infringement under the Charter of Rights) which removed the spending curb on special interest groups, "nor were they under any obligation to disclose the sources of financing."

With the guidance of pollster strategies, the Business Council on National Issues (which includes Southam Inc. and Thompson companies) and their government allies bought the election and free trade with \$56-million versus the \$5-million raised by the anti-free trade coalition, a simple use of economic power in "a ratio of 10:1."

Nelson quotes U.S. political media adviser and adman Tony Schwartz: "The goal of a media adviser is to tie up the voter and deliver him [sic] to the candidate." Nelson continues, "If behind the media gatekeepers stands the Public Relations profession skilled media relations, then behind the PR profession stands the pollster." Nelson describes in detail the functioning of psychographic polling and constant tracking.

When advocacy advertising helped produce a 10-year low in the public's confidence in the press (down to 13.7 per cent in 1983) the counter action to solve the "legitimacy gap" PR crisis for the private sector was simply, as it had been for 20 years, to buy up the media. Nelson writes: "Media analysts are predicting that by the early 1990s fewer than ten corporate conglomerates will own and control most of the world's major newspapers, magazines, broadcasting stations, book publishers, movie studios, and record and videocassette industries." (It's hard to believe that just a decade ago that the Kent Royal Commission on Newspa-

pers suggested that *The Globe & Mail* have a community-based advisory board.)

In her essay on polling, Nelson exposes the process which has made not only free trade but the "selling of the deficit" so easy. "Thus by the mid-'80s a number of significant factors had come together in Canada: the rise of a highly sophisticated polling apparatus connected to the ruling Tory government, the rise of advocacy advertising as a way of bypassing the reportorial filter, the rise of corporate public affairs PR as an organized way of influencing government behind closed doors, and the dismantling of that section of the Elections Act which had formally controlled spending by special interest groups. If this looked like a simulacrum of earlier events in the United States, to a great extent it was."

The chapter on "Multi-National Free Lunch" documents the free trade zones and export processing zones. First developed in the Third World, then introduced into Britain, close to being legislated in the U.S. and now being discussed here, the free lunch gives us a chilling glimpse into the unprotected employment future with no minimum wage or a lower rate of minimum wage for youth. Nelson, using a broader metaphor, refers to the process of "triage"—the systematic culling and dismissing of peoples and species deemed peripheral or unimportant to some larger agenda—as the underlying Zeitgeist that has replaced the many other values as the basis for society.

To me it looks like a new feudalism: Sri Lankan women are being paid \$28.10 (U.S.) per month to produce \$19,200.00 (wholesale price) worth of Gloria Vanderbilt jeans. Other women working 36 to 48-hour "stay-in" shifts in the electronic industries and are being given amphetamines to stay awake. "Moreover to earn a subsistence wage, most zone employees must work extensive overtime hours. In South Korea, Taiwan, and the Philippines, zone workers typically put in hundred-hour weeks just to get by."

And in Canada? Suspension of mini-

mum wage requirements, waving of compulsory employer contributions to UIC, CPP and public medical insurance, and prohibition of closed shops (unions). Through alliances between business and regional development agencies the following city governments have expressed interest in free trade zones: Halifax, Hamilton, Winnipeg, Edmonton and Port St. John.

Far from inflammatory, Nelson's work is solidly researched. Her satirical wit may anger her critics but she brings with it a biting accuracy. Without a doubt *Sultans of Sleaze* is essential reading and what it says should be restated in many different forms. It is a major accomplishment and reminds us of how important our alternative presses and periodicals are and have become.

The final word appropriately belongs to Joyce Nelson who ends her book by saying: "It is often said that 'we can't go back to the past,' an expression that usually means the modern multi-nationals-based economy is so completely dependent on maintaining the status quo that alternative or older ways of living would undermine it and throw it into chaos. Besides the fact that the global economy is already in chaos, the practices upon which it is based are politically, morally, and environmentally bankrupt. Indeed, that is why such a tremendous public-relations effort is put into maintaining the status quo—a redoubling of rhetoric and photo-ops, cosmetic 'change,' and meaningless gestures meant to keep us from using our imaginations to find radical alternatives... we can begin by reclaiming our imaginations, which have been colonized by a century of PR geared to 'regimenting the public mind.' As a first step that would be a radical break." ■

[VIDEO]

Self — lessness

BUFFALO GALS

Jody J. Lafond, Chris Hill,
Barbara Lattanzi, Julie Zando.
A Space, Toronto
January 20 - February 16, 1990

by Sandra Haar

If women derive power from being on display, then to have control over images of ourselves—playing into a dynamic of exhibitionism—is little more than an orchestration of the display of our self/lessness. Julie Zando's videotape *Hey Bud* uses televised footage of Pennsylvania Treasurer Bud Dwyer's suicide to examine the power that Dwyer had, as an exhibitionist, over millions of TV viewers as they awaited his ultimate act—his literal loss of self. Zando's tape implicates the viewer—the act of viewing itself is the explication of her discussion of power relations. Though women have traditionally held power as exhibitionists, Zando suggests that we have held that power on others' terms because we have been outside of their discourse. Edited to suggest, at once, ritual and fashion photography, *Hey Bud* depicts women in elaborate, colourful voluminous dresses, primping each other's skirts against a brightly-coloured, solid background—a mesmerizing display of movement and colour. While drawn in as the audience/voyeurs of the tape, there is also an identification through an introspective female voice-over. She tries to negotiate Dwyer's power over her and her own power(lessness) in front of the media spectacle.

The question of women's subjectivity—how we see ourselves and how we



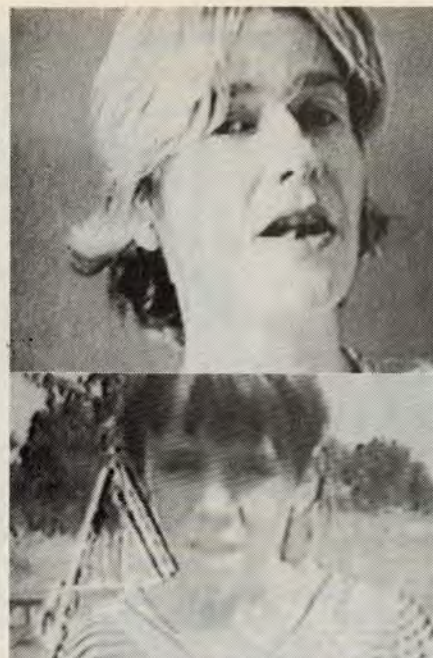
Still from *Bella Donna Poisoning*. . . by Chris Hill & Barbara Lattanzi.

are seen—in media(ted) representations concerns much of the work in *Buffalo Gals*, a show of four women video artists from Buffalo, New York curated by Kim Tomczak. An engagement with feminist theories and positioning within feminist discourses are central to the works. Strategies, dropped by many video artists in the imperative for "accessible" work, are incorporated into visual techniques and theoretical issues as specifically feminist video strategies. The anti-aesthetic of Chris Hill and Barbara Lattanzi, for example, draws attention to the subtle signs within each successive image in their tapes. Jody Lafond attacks narrative structure as part of her deconstruction of the documentary which depicts the (patriarchal) world as real and verifiable. Julie Zando's anti-narrative assigns the construction of her stories to a storyteller and the videomaker. Autobiography is used as a critical tool—the self and stories of ourselves are seen as the place from which to develop and critique theory.

A voice-over provides the focal point and structure for *Reproductive Histories Update* by Chris Hill. A woman situates herself as a (younger) woman in a time of uncertain contraception, (double) bind-

ing moral standards and illegal abortions. Playing out from this central narrative, scrolled text relates short anecdotes: how other women managed to get abortions, for example, through the (extra)ordinary conditions of monetary privilege and medical collaboration. Outside of these small escapes, the bleak picture of the inevitability of socio-legal conception/oppression is reinforced with a series of images—women circling the running track above a gym, the repetitive flipping of queen and king playing cards and old photos depicting metaphors of chance and gambling, a cinema verite-style camera walking down a pier illustrating the precarious, narrow choices available. *Reproductive Histories Update* prioritizes one woman's personal experience and the politics of her life through her own feminist analysis.

As the site of political struggle (and increasingly manifest in the media), feminists have understood the politics of abortion as locating women's bodies as the repositories of moral agency, legal jurisdiction, and medical colonialism in conflict with self-empowerment. The statement on *Reproductive Histories Update* in the *Buffalo Gals* catalogue states



Stills from *Let's Play Prisoners*.

the issue as the "subject[ion of] women to the biological and psychological condition of dependent vessels, with men as their inevitable caretakers." In this broad political analysis, the politic of abortion is to be seen as one piece of the medical definition of the functioning of women's bodies.

"Mania of ludicrous gesticulation, headaches... increased by thinking, illusions of the fancy and frightful visions, sleep kept off by anguish..." The recitation of physical symptoms that continues throughout *Bella Donna Poisoning, Masculinization of the Clitoris & Other Complaints* (by Chris Hill and Barbara Lattanzi) carries with it emotional inferences. Illustrated by constructions of femininity (e.g., plastic dolls), the tape suggests that gendered constructions predetermine the definition of women's physical symptoms and, indeed, the definition of women's bodies as ill or malfunctioning.

A dramatic overtone is introduced and sustained in *Soma 1* (by Barbara Lattanzi) by a classical suspense musical score. Mysterious and foreboding, like the soundtrack, the textual descriptions of medical symptoms contain another truly sinister meaning: like *Bella Donna Poisoning*... the description of "emo-

tional" disorders are rooted in physical ones. Printed jokes intercut with the symptoms also suggest a double meaning, a shifting of meaning pointing to the ideological basis of ascribing symptoms to emotions. The tape, constructed through text alone, becomes a reflexive depiction of the process of "reading." The segments of text are dealt with as visual entities that vary in their positioning on the screen, appearing in their entirety, line by line, or letter by letter.

In Julie Zando's tape *Let's Play Prisoners* the site of the definition of women's subjectivity is in relationships among women. Based on a short story by Jo Anstey about manipulation, love, power and masochism in two young girls' friendship, *Let's Play Prisoners* is told by three storytellers. A young girl (who repeats lines following her mother's prompting) and the author of the story are both manipulated by a controlling figure as they tell the story. The young girl's mother and the author's lover control the camera and direction, and hence, the representation. The camera has power as long as the speaker is willing to be on display and the writer has power only by holding back the revelation. The contexts of sexuality and mother/daughter relationships are indicated by erotic and childhood home-video footage. The story-line is broken, fragmented, dis-ordered and repeated but the desire to be loved remains constant in these relationships.

An analysis of the power relations in gender differentiated psychologies is taken as the model for women's relationships. The boundaries of gender identities inscribed in power and control are broken in the young girls' games and rules. *Let's Play Prisoners* breaks with those feminist ideals of mutual support and protection of children that are derived from the image of woman as nurturer. The taping itself actively sets up a power dynamic and the viewer is implicated as consensual as she contends with issues of representation that are made problematic by that dynamic.

Continuing on the theme of the location/genesis of desire, Zando's *The A-Ha! Experience* is centered around a moment of a sexual act. The action in the tape is intermittently frozen, fetishizing the central character's actions and her look at the camera. As the voice-over explains, she arrives home after a "date," and after preparing to go to bed, enters her bedroom to find her mother in her bed. At this juncture, her (male) lover's entrance, the (imaginary) presence of her mother and the (unseen) "camera" as a controlling/directing presence intersect. In Zando's use of psychoanalytic theory, ideological issues become central, as a political site, in the power to define women's reality.

Inscribed by her environment and ideology, Jacqueline Nocal's (*Jacqueline Nocal* by Jody J. Lafond) "philosophical" speculations describe the world. Her greatness (and authority as a thinking and speaking subject) is at once conferred and undermined through contradictions in her poses, the camera angle and her voice-over. Jacqueline, unlike feminist theorists who look into (anthropological) prehistory for the causes of woman's subordination to man, looks to home-video footage of her friends making a fire on the beach for proof of the division of labour and men's appropriation of women's labour. In the manner of a bad documentary, the images always misdescribe Jacqueline's elaborate stories so that disbelief is never suspended. When the recognition of the image overtakes her narrative description, her authority is put into crisis and her theories seem, at once, to be both accurate readings of a situation and bizarre extrapolations from a non-event, suggesting the tension between feminist and non-feminist readings of the everyday. After taking us through the colonization of the earth, water and fire by man, the mother/daughter relationship, domestically and theoretically, Jacqueline declares, "To the air, sisters..." ■

[VIDEO]

Is the Rectum an Asshole?

BLOOD RISK

Andy Fabo and Michael Balser
Distributed by V Tape

by Brent Cehan

Blood Risk, the title of Andy Fabo and Michael Balser's video collaboration that follows *Survival of the Delirious*, refers both to a warning label and to personal and emotional gambles. The tape, loosely modeled on Jean Cocteau's film *The Blood of a Poet*, focuses on an artist's frustrations in creating work in the midst of the AIDS crisis. On one side, the demands of activism seem to preclude making "art." On the other, academics who previously ignored the crisis now use it to produce elaborate theoretical essays. (The protagonist dismisses these as "shtick.") Fabo has said elsewhere that "community is created when we articulate our private hopes, fears, joys and sorrows." This new tape argues for, and is a demonstration of, an art practice which does just that.

Jean Cocteau's film seems an odd place to locate these concerns. In an introduction to *The Blood of a Poet*, Cocteau claims that he sought to objectively film what he described as "the poetic state" and that the resulting work, a version of himself, was "a thousand times more real." Myself, I was struck by how much of the film's subjectivity was an expression of the cultural ideologies of the time. The film combines cultural icons and traditions of Western art history—woman as muse, the "mystery" of the Orient, the dominance of the Greco-Roman "heritage"—with the myth of the artist as self-sacrificing victim to his work. That this

use of history and icons denies Cocteau's homosexuality indicates that a representation of subjectivity whether the "soul," "the subconscious" or "the poetic state," rather than attempting to escape the social and political, should lead to their examination.

In an early sequence of *Blood Risk*, the artist and his lover talk in bed, alternately about their concerns over having other sexual partners and about the artist's childhood blood brother. The illusion of intimate pillow talk is broken when the image dissolves to reveal the artist in bed with a similar man reading from the same script. Several dissolves later, the actors playing the artist and the lover read each

other's parts. By the final line of the scene, "We're all in this together," the dissolves begin to suggest bodies folding into each other. The initial sense of intimacy is simultaneously denied and restored.

The main narrative begins when, as in the Cocteau's film, the artist discovers a mouth/wound on his hand. The hand summons him towards a mirror which becomes the portal to another world—a hotel. (The artist's muse, however, points out that this really isn't possible.) Once inside, the artist moves from doorway to doorway, peering through the keyholes. The rooms become the settings for the ensuing action.

Although the tape mimics Cocteau's narrative and in many ways argues for his approach, *Blood Risk* also employs the techniques of critical video practice. Actors are interrupted on camera. Computer graphics, drawing and words rupture the already tenuous narrative to provide commentary. At times, the tape itself seems haphazard and prone to the same indecision the protagonist experiences. At others, the tape treads between the representation of fantasies and experience, and its critique.

One sequence juxtaposes an image of aggressive sexuality (a man in S/M leather



Photo courtesy V Tape



straps masturbating) with actual risks of transmission (presumably the same man on voice-over relating how his blood accidentally spilled on a nurse during blood tests). On one level, the scene is a clever paraphrase of one in Cocteau's film featuring a child in leather straps. On another, the man's obvious concern for the nurse's safety not only debunks the association of sex and death that runs through Cocteau's film up to present media hype, but also the notion that sexually aggressive stances are necessarily linked to a disregard for others' welfare.

The two sequences that follow address theory more directly. The first features two self-congratulatory academics, one of whom makes innumerable Freudian slips and has produced a paper comparing the rectum to a cave. They are interrupted by the cries of a child who, occupying the site of the developing personality's social indoctrination, is the object of their research. The child (or is it the psychiatrist?) reads a text at breakneck speed. Its subject is the division between desire and the knowledge that desire is formed within a social context.

In the following sequence, an unseen

penitent confesses, "Father, I smell come." His confessor responds in a hilarious monologue that fuses the religious imperative to deny the flesh with theoretical jargon. "The senses are the devil's conduit. The rectum is a grave... a cave. Do not worship the solar anus: the bronze eye. Do not lend currency to the excremental economy of the bronze eye... Do not fall party into cynical sex, sex without secretion, of sex in the absence of panic ovaries of a body without organs." The confessional ends revealing Fabo on a toilet, "I smell piss I smell blood I smell come I smell shit" The camera hurtles to the floor of the derelict hotel. The body's appearance becomes a site of rupture not only to theoretical dogma but also to the tape's story and continuity.

These scenes assume the viewer's acquaintance with recent discourses on the body. The opening-night audience, which recognized the phrases from George Bataille, Arthur Kroker and Leo Bersani responded with loud and somewhat embarrassed laughter. Each of the three writers posit sex as a race to self-annihilation. Bataille, whose works have been revived in recent writing, develops

a metaphysics of sex as violation. Kroker, in his essay "Panic Sex in America," characterizes contemporary sexuality as the body's desperate assertion against its replacement by machines. In "Is the Rectum a Grave?" Bersani redeems the "loss of self" during intercourse by connecting it to the infant who learns to enjoy its inevitable loss of control and pain.

It's tempting (and Krokeresque) to imagine these writings as adjacent black holes sucking in tangents from feminist critiques, psychoanalysis and post-structuralism into vacuums and emitting geodesic domes. Although these writings don't form a coherent whole, they colonize sexuality as a field of expertise. (Oral sex, however, which doesn't link with discourse on penetration is almost never discussed.)

The critique within *Blood Risk* comes from Michel Foucault, whose work provides the image of the confessional as well as the title for Fabo's most recent exhibition, *Technologies of the Self*. In his introduction to *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault argues that the transformation of sexuality into discourse is not a progressive process of liberation. Instead the technology of the confessional, once the device of the church now becomes part of the shift of control to psychoanalysis.

The tape does not attempt to create a coherent or conclusive statement. The artist is back in his apartment, angry over a friend being stopped when border guards discovered a medication timer in his suitcase. The artist is still unsure of his direction and frustrated by his opportunities for action. Yet throughout the tape the artist longs for an intuitive, tactile approach to art and the tape ends with a quote from Cocteau describing his process of working deep inside himself. *Blood Risk*, with its combination of political anger, personal stories and parody, gains its strength because it looks around. ■

Brent Cehan is a Toronto artist and writer.

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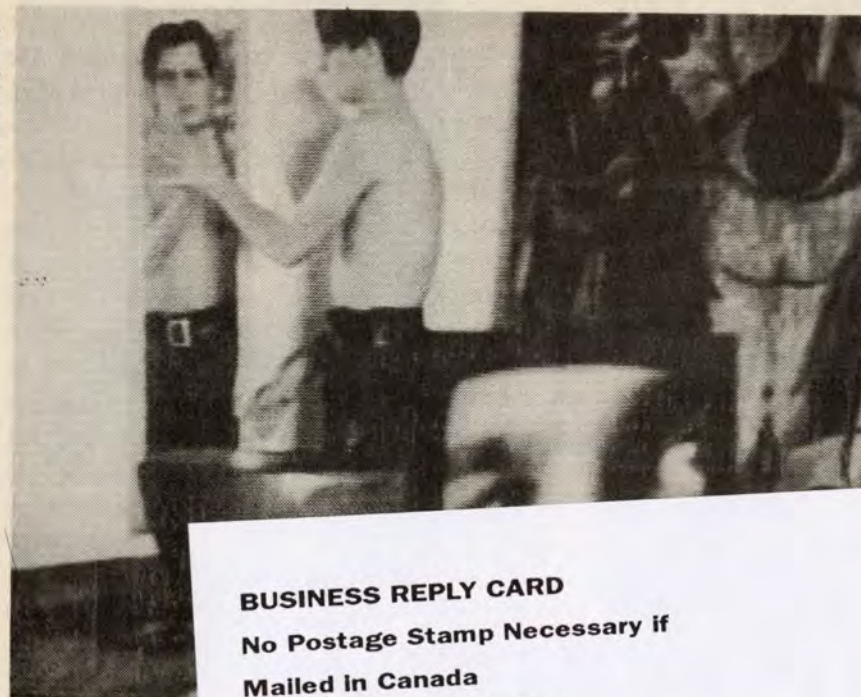
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straps masturbating transmission (presumably on voice-over relay, accidentally spilled blood tests). On one clever paraphrase of a film featuring a child, another, the man's the nurse's safety and association of sex through Cocteau's media hype, but also all aggressively stashed linked to a disregard

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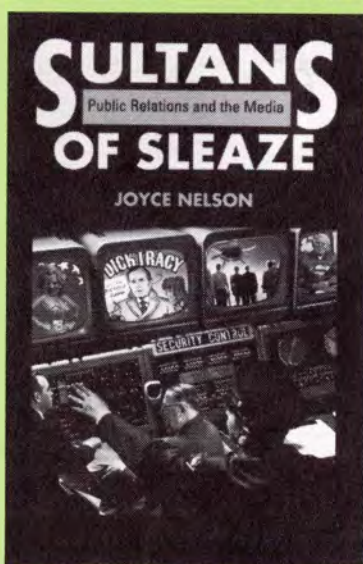
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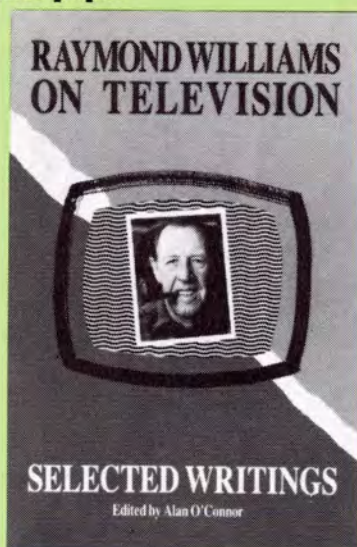


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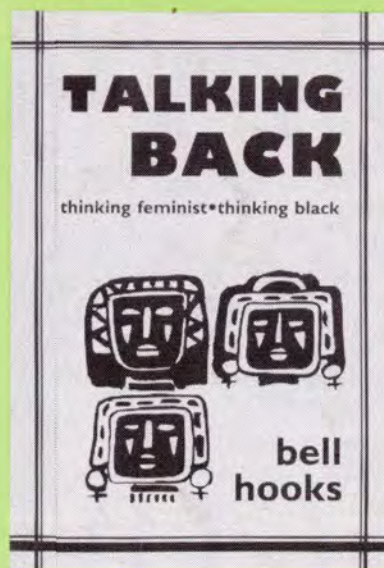
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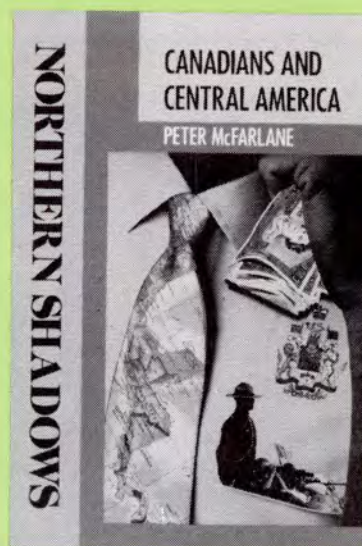


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