

Volume 27 Number 3 \$5.50

ART MEDIA POLITICS



# FUSE

MAGAZINE

## Taking over by screen:

Argentinian independent media  
rises from the ashes of neo-liberalism  
(as told by David McIntosh)



### Also in this issue

Considerations of Ché, A-bombs,  
and interactive strategies

Reviews of Jeff Thomas, Joscelyn  
Gardner, and the inheritors of  
Duchamp



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72

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Theodore Wan, *Bound by Everyday Necessities II*, detail, 1979, Vancouver Art Gallery Acquisition Fund

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Volume 27 Number 3 September 2004

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Canada



CENTRE DE DOCUMENTATION  
ARTEXTE  
DOCUMENTATION CENTRE

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ARTIST-RUN CALGARY

## Three heads are better than one

<p>The New Gallery</p>	<p><b>The New Gallery</b> 516 - D 9th Avenue SW Calgary, AB T2P 1L4 T. 403.233.2399 F. 403.290.1714 E. info@thenewgallery.org www.thenewgallery.org Submission Deadline : October 15, 2004</p>
<p>the Stride Gallery</p>	<p><b>the Stride Gallery</b> 1004 MacLeod Trail SE Calgary, AB T2G 2M7 T. 403.262.8507 F. 403.269.5220 E. stride2@telusplanet.net www.stride.ab.ca Submission Deadline : ongoing</p>
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(with support from the Canada Council Foreign Visiting Artist Program)

<p><b>Alain Paiement</b> <i>Le monde en chantier</i> <i>Living Chaos</i> 30 October 2004 – 2 January 2005 at Centennial Square Organized and circulated by the Galerie de l'Université du Québec à Montréal (UQÀM) Curated by Anne-Marie Ninacs</p>	<p><b>Janet Hodgson</b> <i>Here and There, Then and Now</i> 30 October 2004 – 2 January 2005 in Gairloch Gardens Curated by Marnie Fleming</p> <p><b>In the Gardens</b> New work by Liz Magor on view Fall 2004.</p>
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ALAIN PAIEMENT, PARAGES, 2002  
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SEAN WHALLEY installation details of *Second Story*  
2000-ongoing, recycled lumber

## editorial

Watching CNN, it would be tempting to believe that the Kobe Bryant trial is at least as significant a world event as the American occupation of Iraq. And recent events in Sudan seem completely off the radar. This is not unlike the Rwanda genocide ten years ago, when 800,000 people being hacked to death with machetes seemed less compelling to the mainstream media than the question of whether or Simpson would be found guilty.

It has often been noted that there is a hierarchy of media interest in human suffering. On September 11 we learned that at the high end of that scale are American victims of large-scale terrorist attacks. These are followed closely by anyone alleged to have been molested, raped or murdered by a male African-American celebrity. The mainstream media seem to notice the rest of the world, particularly the non-Western world, only when some part of it gets in the way of us interests.

Similarly, American soldiers are the highest priority victims in the Iraq war. Iraqi civilian casualties are also occasionally noted, but they affect the American conscience not for the inherent value of the lives lost, but precisely because they have been killed by Americans. Those who

are murdered or starve to death elsewhere are likely to be left to suffer outside the spotlight of us media attention.

Human history's most horrific self-inflicted disasters have been facilitated by a failure to extend empathy beyond one's immediate circle. But failure of empathy can function more insidiously as well. We can be sharing socialists with our family and friends, and ruthless capitalists when we vote or do business. And the complacency of the over-fed and over-developed world conveniently meshes with the agendas of even more powerful interests, including those that control media empires. The result insures that empathy does not extend to those whose exploitation feeds first world excess and maintains extraordinary individual wealth. The result is the nightmare of inequity that is our world.

When Argentina rejected the neo-liberal economic model in 2001 the mainstream media did pay attention (a mass uprising in the streets is photogenic), but the revolutionary political implications were ignored in favour of treating it as an economic crisis. As David McIntosh details in this issue's feature, where the mainstream media failed, media arts exploded within the country itself. People began to use

media to create culture from and through their own political experience.

This is a lesson we might want attend to in Canada, where our Liberal government continues to campaign and win power on social issues while quietly making the "structural adjustments" that are gradually turning us into the us. If empathy is a capacity rather than a given, then we need to learn it. Argentina is culture that has the potential to teach us, but mass media do not provide us with this sort of culture: we must create it for ourselves in whatever spaces are left open to us.

*As this issue was going to press we learnt the sad news of Bob Boyer's death. Bob was a thoughtful, talented and generous artist and art educator of Métis heritage. As a professor and department head at the Regina campus of the First Nations University of Canada, he influenced many generations of Aboriginal artists. Bob died doing what he loved: powwow dancing. He was 56 years old. We can't afford to be without him, but we are.*

— The Editorial Board

**CALL FOR  
TECHLAB  
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Interested in **exhibiting** or **curating** a new media art project for the **TechLab** at the **Surrey Art Gallery**?

Proposals from artists and curators involving **digital audio, video, interactivity, and other application of computer and/or electronic art forms** are welcome.

For information about the TechLab and proposal requirements follow the links to the Surrey Art Gallery's pages from [www.arts.surrey.ca](http://www.arts.surrey.ca) or email [artgallery@city.surrey.bc.ca](mailto:artgallery@city.surrey.bc.ca) to request a PDF.



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AN EXHIBITION OF WORK BY THE SHORTLISTED ARTISTS WILL BE ON VIEW AT THE ART GALLERY OF NOVA SCOTIA FROM **SEPTEMBER 18TH, 2004 TO NOVEMBER 21ST, 2004.**

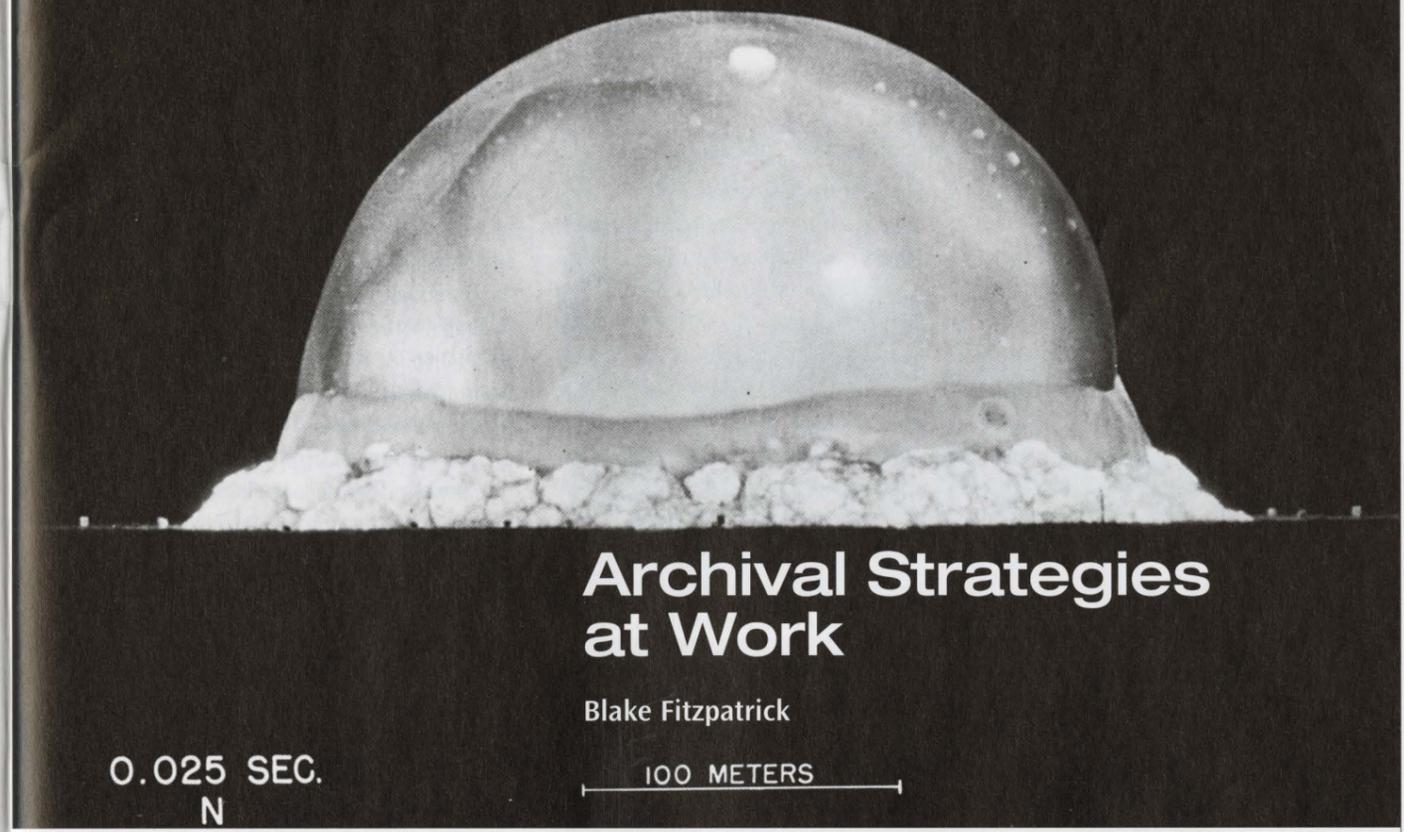
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**Archival Strategies at Work**

Blake Fitzpatrick

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100 METERS

Berlyn Brixner, *Trinity: 5:30 AM, July 16, 1945*, from *At Work in the Fields of the Bomb*

If I learned anything through the fields of the Bomb it is this: the closer you get to nuclear weapons the harder it is to see them.

Robert Del Tredici

In 1987, Robert Del Tredici achieved international acclaim with his groundbreaking book, *At Work in the Fields of the Bomb*. The publication was timely, arriving a year after the Chernobyl meltdown and at a moment of high nuclear anxiety in the final years of the Cold War. The political and environmental realities of this period charged the reception of the work with urgency and challenged viewers to think of art as a form of investigative activism that could make even the shadowy realm of the Bomb visible.

In the post-Cold War 1990s a number of Del Tredici's photographs from his "Bomb" book were re-circulated in a series of US Department of Energy publications. The Department of Energy was responsible for

the nuclear testing program during the Cold War and is now engaged in cleaning up many radioactively contaminated sites. The paradox is that Del Tredici's original documentation of the nuclear arsenal during the 1980s has turned out to be the most complete visual record of the nuclear-weapons complex, rendering this nuclear critic the industry's inadvertent archivist. Unhinged from their archival moorings, the post-Cold War traffic in Del Tredici's images have launched new rhetorical arguments framed by new layouts, new captions and the institutional context of the publication itself. In the afterlife of Del Tredici's photographs our present nuclear dilemmas are therefore revisited. But to what extent can Del Tredici's archive of atomic photographs



Detail of "No. 2" by Nadja Sayej

**NEW ABSTRACT FUSION**

September 7 to October 2, 2004  
Vernissage: Thursday, September 9, 5 - 7 pm

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Other Fall programming to be announced.

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continue to construct oppositional counter-memories of the nuclear era within the presentational context of a report from headquarters?

#### Afterimages in government reports

In *At Work in the Fields of the Bomb*, the cultural invisibility of the atomic manufacturing complex was strategically undermined through image sequences that, according to Del Tredici, “have a subversive quality to them, they undercut the industry.”<sup>2</sup> One of the ways that Del Tredici challenged the public memory of the Bomb as offered by the nuclear industry was by remembering Hiroshima in the volume’s linear narrative of Cold War nuclear production.

Deliberately, Del Tredici ends his narrative through the fields of the Bomb where the

nuclear age began — ground zero, 1945. In this closing section, Del Tredici juxtaposed Berlyn Brixner’s documentation of the first atomic test in New Mexico, code named “Trinity,” with Yoshito Matsushige’s photographs taken in Hiroshima on 6 August 1945, the day that city was bombed. The belated placement of these photographs as the work’s coda defies a linear history in which Trinity and Hiroshima might more properly announce the beginning of the atomic era and therefore be staged in the opening pages of the book. However, like a repressed trauma, the revelation of this ruptural event is pushed back into the deep structure of the volume’s “unconscious” to erupt belatedly, at the wrong time. Psychiatrist Robert J. Lifton suggests:

The larger a human event, the more its significance eludes us. In the case of Hiroshima’s encounter with the

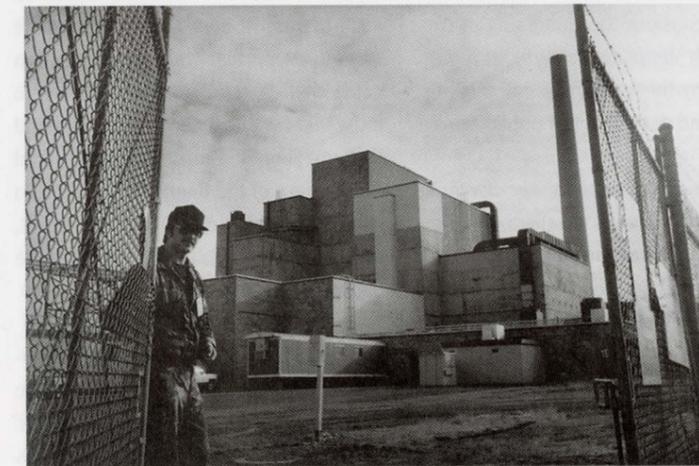
atomic bomb — surely a tragic turning point in man’s psychological and historical experience — the meaning is perhaps only now beginning to reveal itself.<sup>3</sup>

As a self-conscious work of historical representation, *At Work in the Fields of the Bomb* formulates a response to nuclear history in which the past comes into legibility in the present because it is only in the present that the implications of Hiroshima can be taken up. By activating the afterlife of source images from the dawn of the nuclear era, Del Tredici’s archival strategy demonstrates an ability to be regenerative and incorporative as it takes other imagery under its control. Built into any archival history is therefore a deferral of meaning in which history opens out to the future and is constantly rewritten in present terms.

The end of the Cold War did not put Del Tredici’s archive to rest. The individual photographs from *At Work in the Fields of the Bomb* that return in a series of US Department of Energy reports from the 1990s speak not only of the historical context from which they were drawn but also of the present context in which they are viewed.<sup>4</sup> On these terms, we might read photographs as open-ended documents that come with histories attached, but that are viewed through contemporary contexts that modify and respond to them. What then are the new “official” narratives spoken through these returning images and what do they tell us about our contemporary nuclear dilemmas?

Consider a comparison of two different photographs taken on the same day in 1984, outside the gates of the Hanford B-Reactor. The Hanford “plutonium factory” supplied plutonium for the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs and the Cold War nuclear arsenal until 1968. In *At Work in the Fields of the Bomb*, the photograph is titled “The World’s First Plutonium Factory.” It depicts a security guard standing in the middle of an open gate, blocking access to the plant. His body language suggests that he is resisting the intrusion of the photographer — suspicious, the guard seems to ask, “Who goes there?” This reading is in keeping with the overall political context of the volume, which had as its objective a revelation of nuclear sites and the prohibitions of public access surrounding them. Del Tredici’s photographs mark an intervention into the borderlands of this contested zone and make visible the enforced invisibility of the Bomb.

As Del Tredici reveals again and again, violating the Bomb’s secret realm means confronting a resisting nuclear authority. Engaging such confrontations over issues of public access challenges the cultural



Above: Robert Del Tredici, *The World’s First Plutonium Factory*, 1984, from *At Work in the Fields of the Bomb*

Below: Robert Del Tredici, *Hanford’s B-Reactor*, 1984, from *Closing the Circle on the Splitting of the Atom*

invisibility of the bomb by making seeing and by extension, photography itself, a political act.

In the second photograph, reproduced on the first page of the Department of Energy’s *Closing the Circle on the Splitting of the Atom* (1996), the same location is identified by the more descriptive title “Hanford’s B-Reactor.” Taken just moments after the previously discussed photograph, the same guard is seen in a more welcoming stance. He seems to be saying, “Come on in!” The photograph marks a type of “opening” to the book, but also to a new post-Cold War history of the



Yoshito Matsushige, *Hiroshima*, August 6, 1945 (detail), from *At Work in the Fields of the Bomb*

Bomb. Drawn from the archive after the fact, this newer choice reflects metaphorically on the "Openness Initiative" brought about by then-us Secretary of Energy Hazel O'Leary. O'Leary's signature issue was openness throughout the bomb complex and as a result, the decision to use one photograph versus another is based on this — more open — historical context.

Because history is always interpreted after the fact, the meaning of images in an archive is always in reserve and mobilized by systems of social and political power toward various present needs. For example, consider the captioning of the photograph *Sampling the Derby*, as reproduced from the vantage point of both Cold War and post-Cold War publications.

In *At Work in the Fields of the Bomb*, a middle-aged female worker is photographed in what appears to be a routine industrial setting. Del Tredici's caption cites the elevated levels of radiation she is exposed to by the uranium "derby" — so called because it is shaped like the top of a derby hat:

This woman drills holes in new derbies and sends the uranium metal

shavings to a lab that measures their radioactivity. The metal gives off alpha, beta and gamma radiation. At the surface of the derby, the radiation levels are 260 millirem/hr of gamma. The woman wears a flower in her hair because it is the week before Christmas.

Strategically, the image-text shocks viewers by juxtaposing banal factory work, its invisible dangers and the human gesture of a flower worn in the hair. The juxtaposition asks viewers to consider the banality of atomic victimization and to wonder — is this what somebody irradiating themselves looks like? The up-close banality of nuclear weapons production poses challenges for photographers who must find ways to avoid normalizing and thus making invisible, the exceptional implications of the Bomb. Perhaps, this is what Del Tredici means when he notes, "the closer you get to nuclear weapons the harder it is to see them."

As a critical strategy for documentary photography, Del Tredici's image-text might be seen to position viewers in an empathetic identification with the lone victim, thus individualizing a larger set of systemic issues with nuclear toxicity. However, this

potentially isolated reading is largely refuted by Del Tredici's sequencing of additional photographs and interviews with atomic workers and the opposing nuclear authorities who consistently underestimate the detrimental health effects of radiation exposure. Throughout the text, viewers are invited to see not only the dangerous work that nuclear workers conduct, but the complicity of the us government in keeping the health risks associated with nuclear work a secret. The routine procedures used by a nuclear industry that would treat radiation exposure as normal are critically exposed.

Such commonplace exposure to the low-grade terrors of atomic production exemplifies what Paul Virilio has termed *pure war*. Pure war is not about total war nor does it spell out in a nuclear context the drama and spectacle of doom. Instead, "pure war" proposes the active preparation of war as normalized in the social and economic relationships of discrete communities. At the time of Del Tredici's research, bomb making in the United States spread over a manufacturing complex that included thirteen states and employed approximately 90,000 people. Virilio's concept of "pure war" stresses the constant and commonplace perpetuation of a war "which isn't acted out in repetition but in infinite preparation."<sup>5</sup> These bomb-industry communities figure sharply in the work of Del Tredici as do the belated illnesses that follow in the wake of routine exposure to radiation.

Relocating the same photograph in the 1997 Department of Energy publication *Linking Legacies*, we note that the caption has been rewritten as follows:

A Fernald metals worker collects metal shavings from a new uranium derby. She will send them to an



Robert Del Tredici, *Sampling the Derby*, 1985, from both *At Work in the Fields of the Bomb* and *Closing the Circle on the Splitting of the Atom*



Robert Del Tredici, *Barrels of Transuranic Waste*, 1994, from *Linking Legacies*

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onsite laboratory which confirms the isotopic content and purity of the metal.

Missing in the detail of the later caption is any reference to the radiation count given off the metal the woman drills into or the emblematic human detail of the flower she wears in her hair. Del Tredici states that these references were dropped because they would be filtered out by government editors who reject anecdotal remarks and inaccuracies in official government reports. Unfortunately, what is gained in certainty is lost in terms of an activist's editorial control over textual commentary. Commentary, in this instance, functioning as a way of speaking back to history that can confront the processes by which the pain and injury of nuclear citizens is acknowledged or repressed.

For an artist committed to nuclear criticism, Del Tredici's involvement with the Department of Energy raises questions about criticality and compromise in his recent work. However, if most government reports have as their subtext "trust us, it's under control" then the restaged commentary of Del Tredici's project rests on exposing contradictions in the official message and revealing the evidence of an environmental legacy that is not reassuring. For example, in a Del Tredici photograph commissioned by the Department of Energy for the *Linking Legacies* report, barrels of transuranic waste contaminated

with traces of plutonium are lined up on a concrete storage pad. The caption notes that more than 300,000 barrels of such waste from nuclear weapons production are buried or stored around the country. This menacing archive of foreclosed environmental possibility reminds viewers that the nuclear legacies to which we belatedly arrive are an unfinished responsibility for the future. As such, they are grounds for unfinished critical and political opposition in the present.

In Del Tredici's restless archival practice, a ruinous and destructive legacy is continually remembered into present contexts. This process extends beyond his involvement with the us Department of Energy to include a series of post-9/11 anxiety collages. Entitled *Evolution Pages* (2002-04), these journal entries are densely saturated responses to media representations of world terrorism and environmental ruin. Working on a daily basis, Del Tredici has filled approximately ninety journals. His purpose is to once again recirculate the visual icons of contemporary fear and death that have in recent history been made too visible or, in Walter Benjamin's terms, too "close" by the mass reproduction and mediation of global conflict.<sup>6</sup> The paradox is that the dead become invisible in direct proportion to the cultural numbing that accompanies a flood of images. Perhaps that is also what Del Tredici means when he says that "the closer one gets to nuclear weapons, the harder it is to see them."

#### Notes:

1. Robert Del Tredici, "Romancing the Atom," *Views: The Journal of Photography in New England*, vol. 10 (3) (1989), 3-6.
2. Personal correspondence with the author (1999).
3. Robert J. Lifton, *History and Human Survival: Essays on the Young and Old, Survivors and the Dead, Peace and War, and on Contemporary Psychohistory* (New York: Random House 1970), 158.
4. Collectively, these publications document the environmental legacies of the Cold War nuclear weapons program and the remedial action taken and proposed by the us Department of Energy in cleaning up a number of contaminated sites. See the following: *From Cleanup to Stewardship* (us Department of Energy. doe/em-0466, 1999); *Linking Legacies: Connecting the Cold War Nuclear Weapons Production Processes to Their Environmental Consequences*, (us Department of Energy. doe/em-0319, 1997); *Closing the Circle on the Splitting of the Atom*, (us Department of Energy. doe/em-0266, 1996).
5. Paul Virilio and Sylvère Lotringer, *Pure War* (New York: Semiotext(e) Columbia University, 1997), 92.
6. Benjamin equates shifts in the nature of perception brought about by contemporary life, the masses and new forms of optical representation with the spatiality of "closeness" suggesting: "the desire of contemporary masses to bring things 'closer' spatially and humanly [...] is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction. Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction." From "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 223.

In the past decade, the image of Ernesto Ché Guevara has appeared more frequently on the world's visual landscapes than ever before. In the fetish role of a historical figure, Ché has a continuing impact upon the public social and political arenas, the personal romantic/spiritual sphere and, more than anywhere else, on the global cash register. Artists have contributed to and commented on the many facets of his life and legacy.

The artist who produced the most famous portrait of Ché is Cuban photographer Alberto Korda. Korda never collected royalties for his 1960 photograph, *Guerrillero Heróico*, which is said to be the most widely reproduced image in the history of photography.<sup>1</sup> Merchandise and political posters world wide — from Mike Tyson's tattoo to Andy Warhol's silkscreens — are all based on Korda's photograph, which was first published in 1968, one year after Ché's death.

## Like Ché

Nery Espinoza Quevedo and Ingrid Mayrhofer

### Let's All Be Like Ché

Artist Sadko Hadzihasanovic's new t-shirt with the slogan "Yo tuve un hermano" and the portrait of an attractive cigar smoker goes beyond mere infatuation with his subject. Sadko embraces the Cuban boy-scout motto: *Seremos como el Ché* (We will be like Ché). In his new paintings over digital imagery, the artist and Ché are represented in very close association; in at least one drawing Hadzihasanovic morphs into the very likeness of his hero, in another scene the artist acts like a celebrity stalker, following the young medical student to anatomy class.

*He is alive and talks tonight for CNN* provides faux documentation of a fictional interview the artist claims to have conducted with Ché for CNN. *Ché in Sarajevo 1994*, a digital collage, plants a monument to Guevara in the town square of

Sarajevo. Ché is also located as part of the artist's extended family tree and as one of a group of Yugoslav teachers in Bihac; this large work is titled *Apsolut Ché* and shows Hadzihasanovic's own father as chair of the meeting. The bottle of local spirits, painted over a photograph that was taken in the late fifties when Ché actually visited Yugoslavia, plays on both the commercial application of the hero's portrait and his photographer Korda's successful lawsuit against the vodka company that prevented them from using his famous image on its label. Using digital media to make these interventions works effectively with the artist's challenge to historical narratives in an age when everything is virtually possible and where, as in political activism, there is no copyright protection of an artist's work on the web.

Hadzihasanovic's exercise expands the already large realm of unlikely sightings of the Argentinian-born hero of the Cuban revolution. In a movie poster for *Evita* (with Madonna as Eva Peron), Antonio Banderas adopts a pose from an older Cuban poster. The subcultural relevance of Ché's image has penetrated inner cities and suburbs alike, and provides a universal face for middle-class youth rebellion. Ché's photographs decorate the record covers of subversive rock bands, some of whom — as in the case of Rage Against the Machine's campaign for the Zapatistas in Chiapas — actually support real revolutionary causes. While the radical chic of Ché multiples by Andy Warhol placed his revolutionary legacy on the public-awareness shelf with the soupcan, the ultimate unlikely marketing scheme would have to be downhill skies. Nonetheless, the "Fischer Revolution"



### Bihać - Bosna

Sadko Hadzihasanovic, *Apsolut Che*, 2004, digital print

conquered Austrian slopes in the late nineties with Ché toques and other northern climate gear. The use of Ché's image on Russian tanks during the repression of the Prague Spring was not the last time his memory would be evoked to sell an action that was diametrically opposed to his revolutionary goals.

Seeing Ché's image held high in Mexico among student protesters in 1968 is as fitting in the political environment of the era as is Hadzihasanovic's proposed artistic discourse with Henry Moore on a Cuban beach in the context of 2004. Layered over the 60" x 80" digital output of a photograph of himself reclining on a beach of pristine white sand somewhere in Cuba, the artist has painted a small figure of Dr. Guevara in the lower right corner. Ché faces the artist, whose pose is that of Chac

Mool,<sup>2</sup> one of the Mayan sculptures Henry Moore would have observed in the British Museum in his own search for inspiration from other masters. The title of the work, *How to explain Henry Moore to Ché*, begs a reversal of the challenge: how to explain Ché to Henry Moore.

Henry Moore was sixty-nine in 1967, the year that Ché was executed by the Bolivian army at age thirty-nine. Moore was born into a working-class family who disapproved of his early artistic aspirations. His father, a miner, related art production to manual labour. Ché was born and raised middle class, studied medicine and dedicated most of his adult life to the struggle of liberation for workers and peasants in countries far from his home. Like Moore, Ché was well educated, well read and well versed in philosophy and art.<sup>3</sup>

Had Ché and Henry Moore's father met with Octavio Paz to discuss the class struggle, they might have agreed with the Mexican intellectual, who illustrated how individual workers become an abstraction as they melt into the generic working class. In his 1950 essay *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, Paz also poses the polemic of the revolutionary hero as a legacy of romanticism. The hero gains individual recognition, stands apart from the masses and acquires mythical proportions. In this positioning, the artist and his subject meld into one.

Or, as with Barbara Astman's series of photographs at Jane Corkin Gallery last year, the myth of the revolutionary hero fosters a sexual-tourism fantasy. Astman's artist statement expresses her attraction to La Habana's sensual street culture and her interest in the "incredible proliferation of his image and the meaning his image has, in terms of issues surrounding this historical figure viewed as a pop culture icon."<sup>4</sup> A Canadian visiting Cuba for the first time, Astman lifts the polemic of the revolutionary hero's legacy of romanticism into a vicarious and sexualized moment. The photographs are snapshots of the artist wearing a t-shirt with the famous portrait. She is *Dancing With Ché*. In this exercise, not only does the heroic male image substitute for lack of lived political struggle, there is a strange sense of North American feminized revenge against the macho

Latino, who cannot get away from her dance of obsession. He remains stuck on the t-shirt as long as she says so.

"The powerful of the earth should take heed: deep inside that T-shirt where we have tried to trap him, the eyes of Che Guevara are still burning with impatience"

—Ariel Dorfman

(poster in the Cuban Embassy in Ottawa)

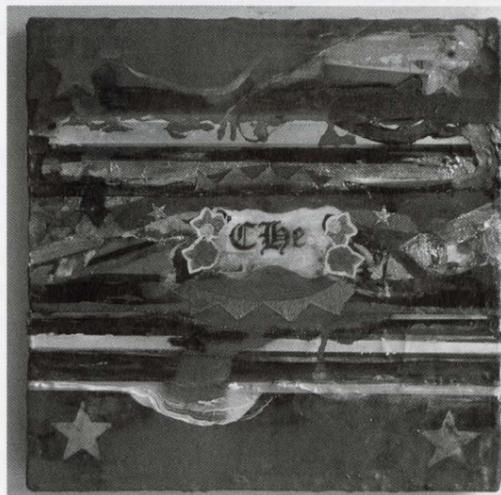
Moore was not concerned with the emotion or heroism of the models for his monumental works. He looked at Africa and the Americas for perfect abstraction of form and shape. In the case of Chac Mool, the Mayan warrior who must have earned his own hero status to merit the large number of likenesses throughout Chichén Itzá, the mythological proportions of his persona are reduced to form, shape and material at the hands of the modern sculptor.

Paz suggests that the abstraction of wage labour leads to an absence of the mythical aspects inherent in the creative process. In turn, abstraction of Chac Mool's form leaves behind the aura of the figure's historical significance and deprives it of its mythology. In a typical alienated wage earning day of the industrial worker, the history of pre-Columbian art, the revolutionary struggle of Ché and the oeuvre of Henry Moore are all equally reduced to

commodities and sold in souvenir shops — a Moore jigsaw puzzle, Ché cigarette lighter and Chac Mool hot-sauce label. At the same time, Moore's forms transcend their era, Chac Mool's presence has withstood the challenges of history and Ché's image will always be that of the hero.

As occurred with other leaders of struggles for liberation in Latin America, Ché's image, along with those of Sandino, Martí and Zapata, is also that of a spiritual saviour. Whether this arises from the role of liberation theology in popular uprisings, or in a popular culture that is saturated with Catholic symbolism, the mythologized image of the hero is also a religious one. Mexican writer Paco Ignacio Taibo II refers to Ché as a "lay Christ." A congregation in Matanzas, Cuba, has placed an icon of Ché among the saints that populate the holy kingdom. In the town hall of Marianao Fidel, Ché and Mother Teresa share the stage on a bulletin board. On the other hand, in Tamaulipas, Mexico, the fear of Communism has earned Ché a place in the corner with the Antichrist.

Contemporary Cuban artist José Toirac (born in Guantánamo, 1966) created a series of thirteen works on paper based on the image of Ché's body titled *The Holy Sheet*, an allusion to the shroud of Turin. While Toirac's allegory to dead heroes in contemporary Cuba may not be shrouded, his choice of religious iconography speaks to the level of theological literacy in this Communist country. British artist Paul Carter assembled an altar-like installation using the same reference (Ché on the shroud of Turin) for this summer's Yugoslav Biennial of Young Artists in Vrsac, Serbia. Carter's *Paint Spill Miracle* also shows an apparition of Ché donning a crown of thorns, and while the piece lacked both subtlety and political punch, it nonetheless spelled out the opiate of the masses.



Raffael (Lito) Iglesias, *Ché*, 2003



Sadko Hadzihasanovic, installation view

Raffael (Lito) Iglesias is a young Canadian artist who appropriates the legacy of Ché with the intent to break down dichotomies of sub- and super-cultures. Lito's work often critiques aspects of the dominant culture such as racial profiling and "aliens." The artist states that his new paintings are "about turning things in on themselves."<sup>5</sup> In the process, he also turns on the romanticism of exile, the generation of "armchair revolutionaries" who perpetuate the myth of a superhuman Ché. Not that the artist isn't personally interested in superheroes — like many of his peers, Lito is equally fascinated by cartoon culture and hip-hop stars, and his work requires a fair level of literacy in pop and political iconography. His latest series of Ché paintings illustrate the word Ché, rather than the Korda prototype. The paintings comprise many layers of brilliant colours and reflective surfaces loaded with symbols of commercial, political and religious relevance in an aesthetic that draws from hip-hop, low-rider car art and the language of contemporary artistic discourse. In colloquial

Argentinian, Ché is not a name, but rather a form of address, meaning something like "you there!" This exclamation becomes the artist's way of calling attention to what the many layers of his paintings imply. The dialectic of idea and the ideal propose provide a glimpse of the hybrid reality of Canadian culture.

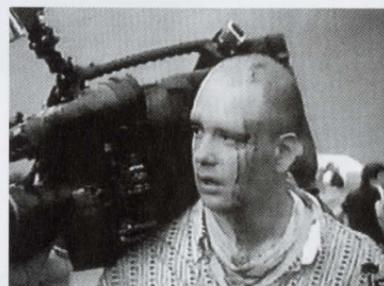
For Hadzihasanovic, who was raised and educated in a socialist society, the objectification of Ché represents the ultimate commodification of hope. His discussion with Ché speaks of nostalgia for the Yugoslavia that could have been and for his own twin brother who remained in Bosnia. *I had a brother — Ché*, says his shirt. Ché as role model is universal and in Hadzihasanovic's universe Ché transcends the limitations of time, space and market. The myth of the hero may well be a legacy of romanticism as Octavio Paz suggests, but the myth of Ché Guevara is also a reality for generations of rebels and their nostalgia for Ché's vision is at the same time an expression of yearning for a better future.

*Nery Espinoza Quevedo and Ingrid Mayrhofer are members of Red Tree, a collective that engages artists and activists in cross-cultural collaboration and interdisciplinary projects.*

#### Notes

1. Trisha Ziff, curatorial statement, Zone Zero, Mexico, City, 2002.
2. We thank Amelia Jiménez for pointing out this connection.
3. Ché has often been photographed with a book in this pose, which bears a resemblance to *Goethe in the Campagna* by Wilhelm Tischbein.
4. Barbara Astman, artist statement, Corkin Gallery, Toronto, 2003.
5. [http://www.peakgallery.com/rev\\_iglesias\\_03.htm](http://www.peakgallery.com/rev_iglesias_03.htm).

## Ellipsis and Insurrection: Argentina, Media,



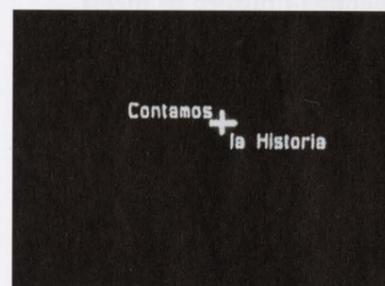
We've turned ideology into blood, saliva, sperm,  
 death, exile, resistance  
 A serenely violent liberation of the hunger  
 of consciousness  
 The problem now is language  
 A revolution which does not permanently  
 revolutionize its language, alphabet,  
 gestures and looks  
 Becomes reactionary or dies

— Fernando Birri, *For a New New New Latin American Cinema*, 1985

We make films to tell stories. We are writing the story  
 of our history. We are telling a story, our history,  
 Argentina's story ...

— *La Bisagra de la Historia* (The Hinge of History), 2002

## Experiment and Liberation David McIntosh



Stills from the Venteveo collective's *La Bisagra de la Historia*, 2002

**F**rantic images of a violent police assault on the people of Buenos Aires. Slow motion images of pillars of smoke rising up from the city streets, of clouds of tear gas spreading through crowds of protesters, of police firing on unarmed people from the back of speeding vans. Deathly still images of bodies lying in the street. *La Bisagra de la Historia* tells a visceral video story of a history of insurrection and repression in Argentina in December 2001, a story set in a moment of failed globalization and violent economic collapse, and a story of popular resistance. An act of insurrection itself, *La Bisagra de la Historia* is one of many such works to emerge from the events of December 2001 which not only tell that immediate history but which reach back into Argentina's past to recuperate a history of artistic insurrection and experimentation and to rebuild a brutalized society.

Reaganomics, voodoo economics, supply-side economics, Washington Consensus, Wild West capitalism, flexible global capital, structural adjustment, IMF discipline, free-trade agreements, post-fordist economics, Conservative Party of Canada free-market campaign

platform. There are many names for, and many incarnations of, the neo-liberal economic model of privatization, deregulation and downsizing that spread throughout the world since it was first enshrined as global gospel truth and proselytized by the fundamentalist Thatcher-Reagan regime in the early 1980s. As it was applied in country after country, this model provoked near economic collapses in Mexico, Russia, Thailand, Indonesia and Korea, but each time disaster was staved off at the last minute by IMF or USA rescue loans to protect their own investments. The model was applied nowhere more brutally and completely than in Argentina in the 1990s, where President Carlos Menem sold every state asset — airlines, natural gas operations, water services, telephone systems — to multinational corporations. He also eliminated public-interest regulation of the activities of those corporations, weakened labour laws to the point of irrelevance and hacked state expenditures on every public program, from education to pensions. This new Argentina was held up by the IMF as a poster

child, a shining example of the potential of the “Third World” to completely reconstruct itself and enter the new millennium on sound global economic terms. But Argentina’s perfect free market rapidly transformed into a perfect nightmare when, in December 2001, a run on the Argentinean peso exploded into a mass flight of capital where over \$40 billion dollars in cash were hustled out of the country in two days. The multinational corporate smash-and-grab left the Argentinean state’s cupboard bare and forced it to suspend payments on its then \$120 billion international debt. Argentina had been sacked and left bankrupt, and this time no one came to the rescue.

On 19 December 2001, millions of suddenly penniless and enraged Argentineans took to — and stayed in — the streets across the country, banging empty pots and



Stills from the Venteveo collective's *La Bisagra de la Historia*, 2002

pans, trashing and burning banks, and looting grocery stores for food they no longer had the money to buy. They also formed local *asambleas populares* (people’s assemblies) to build a network of alternative direct democracies. State repression of the mass popular insurrection was swift, as various armed forces fought to take control, killing at least forty citizens, leading to even more determined resistance by the millions of Argentineans occupying the streets. President Fernando De La Rúa was forced to resign and flee in disgrace. The mobilized mass of Argentinean citizens grew even stronger as self-management and self-organization initiatives grew out from the *asambleas populares* into a range of collective survival initiatives. These ranged from open community kitchens to pharmaceutical drug

barter exchanges where people brought their medications to trade with each other. Out of this post-global commune arose the *Que se vayan todos* (Get rid of them all) movement, a mass popular call for the removal of all politicians, court justices, bureaucrats, bank officials and corporate heads. In parallel with the unfolding of this remarkable insurrectional process, independent media production exploded in a variety of new forms that reconnected with Argentina’s history of media insurrection, which had been suppressed since the 1970s. Many Argentinean activist artists and intellectuals took up the challenge of reaching back in history to examine the last twenty-five years, from the beginning of the murderous Videla military dictatorship in 1976 to the economic collapse of 2001, identifying the period as a broad surface on which the neo-liberal model had been consistently played out. As political

theorist Attilio Boron has suggested, the 2001 collapse marked “the end of the cycle of neo-liberal hegemony in Argentina’s public life. This quarter century long stage extends from the dying moments of Isabel Peron’s government to today.”<sup>2</sup>

Clearly, there were activist intentions and oppositional themes played out in Argentinean film and video between 1976 and 2001, notably in dramatic feature films addressing the legacy of the military dictatorship, like Adolfo Aristarain’s *Tiempo de Revancha* (A Time of Revenge, 1981), Luis Puenza’s *La historia oficial* (The Official Story, 1985), and Hector Olivera’s *La noche de los lapices* (The Night of the Pencils, 1986). Most recently Marco Bechi’s *Garage Olimpo* (2000) and Albertina Carri’s

*Los rubios* (The Blondes, 2003), have presented innovative approaches to this important socio-historical dramatic tradition. A number of documentaries were also produced in this twenty-five-year period that exposed the brutalities of the military dictatorship, including David Blaustein’s *Cazadores de utopias* (Utopia Hunters, 1995) and *Botín de Guerra* (War Booty, 1999). In 2001, just before the economic collapse, a range of documentaries took up the more recent history of the increasingly devastating effects of Menem’s neo-liberal model. Grupo Boedo’s *Agua de Fuego* (Fire Water, 2001) took as its starting point Menem’s 1995 privatization of YPF, the national oil production company. It examines the growth of long-term unemployment into riots and road blockades by *piqueteros* (unemployed picketers who organized into a national movement) and food looting by the suddenly unemployed oil workers in three provincial cities. Alejandro Moujan’s outstanding documentary *Las Palmas, Chaco* (2001) examined the long-term effects of Menem’s 1989 closure of the Las Palmas state-owned sugar-cane factory in the desperately poor northern province of Chaco, which left an entire town without any hope of employment or income. And *Matanza* (2001), by the *Grupo Documental 1º de Mayo* (May Day Documentary Group), followed the growth of a movement of unemployed workers in 1997 in the poor Buenos Aires suburb of Matanzas, to fight further weakening of labour laws and huge increases in privatized water and electricity costs.

All of the works mentioned are important in their own right, but do not fulfil Fernando Birri’s call for a continuing revolution in media language, an approach firmly established in Argentinean cinema in the two decades leading up to the 1976 military dictatorship. It was media work produced after the 2001 collapse and in the midst of the popular rebellion that recuperated the liberationist/experimentalist tradition repressed by the military dictatorship twenty-five years earlier. To more fully comprehend this elliptical relationship between present and past, it is necessary to return to the insurrectionist moment preceding the 1976 coup and the role assumed by insurrectionist filmmakers then.

cosmunism communism cosmic and magical  
for a cosmic, delirious and lumpen cinema  
of completely questionable methods  
(but every operation is a demonstration that  
Utopias can be made real)  
madness and rigor taken in hand  
a confirmation of a cinema for mutants  
a total cinema and hope for communication  
a new game of the mind  
(but every operation is a demonstration that  
Utopias can be made real)  
ideologizing everything but sensualizing everything  
thinking with our guts:  
cosmunism

— Fernando Birri,

*Cosmunism: The Cosmic Communist Manifesto*, 1976<sup>3</sup>

This political-poetic text from filmmaker Fernando Birri sets the stage for understanding the principles underpinning the historical trajectory of media insurrection in Argentina. Acknowledged as the father of New Latin American cinema, Birri’s theories and practice of film as an ongoing political and aesthetic revolution were established in 1958 in his first documentary film *Tire Dié* (Throw Me A Dime), which for the first time portrayed the reality of poverty in Argentina. Made between 1956 and 1958, *Tire Dié* documented the misery of children living in slums surrounding Sante Fe who beg for money from commuting workers on trains. The wildly popular film was screened throughout the country, in all kinds of neighbourhoods — from rich to poor. It was shown on soccer fields, and in schools and union halls, establishing an alternative exhibition network. Birri was eventually forced into exile, returning only after the fall of the military dictatorship, but as a Cosmunist Democratic Alchemist image poet, his originary concept of the documentary film as an experimental and liberatory process expanded dramatically to address a utopian imaginary, all the while maintaining a sensorial commitment to the people. His subsequent memories of the birth of a new insurrectionist film movement resonate with Argentinean media artists experimenting with liberatory representation in a post-collapse context. Twelve years

later, after Argentina's return to democracy and Birri's return to Argentina, he looked back to assess the legacy of the movement he galvanized:

What was this incipient liberatory movement liberating the cinema from? From cultural fetishism, the pseudo-cultural, the sub-cultured. From petit bourgeois ideology. The intention of the cinema of ideas is to be realist and popular at the same time. New cultural and economic realities propel the new cinema of ideas. This is the cinema which gives us consciousness, which worries, scares and weakens those of bad consciousness, reactionary consciousness. It is anti-oligarchic and anti-bourgeois towards its nation, anti-imperialist and anti-colonial towards the international, and it is for the people and against those who oppose the people, it helps us emerge from the sub-stomach to the stomach.

— Fernando Birri, *The Democratic Alchemist*, 1987<sup>4</sup>

Birri's cosmically experimental realism that developed in the 1950s was taken up and further transformed in the 1960s by documentary filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, who formed *Grupo Cine Liberación* (Film Liberation Group), the first film collective in Argentina. Their documentary *La Hora de los Hornos* (The Hour of the Furnaces) began in 1963 as a documentation of popular testimony of the experience of underdevelopment. As filming continued over the five following years, Solanas and Getino's representational focus shifted to one of militant opposition to the state. Forced into clandestinity, their production paralleled the radicalization and coalescence of a number of societal forces, including industrial unions, students and middle classes, into a united militant opposition, which staged violent uprisings in the industrial cities of Rosario and Córdoba. *La Hora de los Hornos* was screened clandestinely to these forces as it was being shot, and viewers participated fully in the construction and direction of the film, enacting subject agency in a completely new experimental insurrectional representational process. Solanas described the film process and resulting artifact as "an Act more than a film; an Act of liberation. An

incomplete work, open to dialogue and to encounters with revolutionary wills. A work marked by our own and by society's limitations, but also full of the possibilities of our reality."<sup>5</sup> The resulting film was a five-hour militant epic of liberation that was acclaimed internationally and violently repressed in Argentina, forcing both Solanas and Getino into exile. Their subsequent manifesto, *Hacia un tercer cine* (Towards a Third Cinema), stands as a key text of the cinema of decolonization and liberation, and locates their film work as a revolutionary feedback structure merging film and historical events, film and liberation theory.

A third key contribution to insurrectionist experimental media in Argentina leading up to the 1976 military coup was made by Raymundo Gleyzer, who was radicalized during his work with ethnographer Jorge Preloran documenting the conditions of aboriginal peoples in Northern Argentina and Brazil in the 1960s. While working as a television journalist, Gleyzer joined the *FATRA* (*Frente de Trabajadores de la Cultura* — Cultural Workers Front), which was a clandestine project of the *PRT* (*Partido Revolucionario de Trabajadores* — Revolutionary Workers Party), a Marxist movement that also maintained its own unit for armed insurrection, the *ERP* (*Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo* — Revolutionary Peoples Army). Gleyzer made a number of works called *Comunicados* (Communiqués) that documented actions of the ERP, including assaults on banks and industries, and formalized his commitment to this experimental insurrectionist project with the formation of a new media collective, *Grupo Cine de La Base* (The Base Film Group). Gleyzer developed the concept of "counter-information" as a means of offering a radically different media perspective of militant actions that illuminated the lies of official media regarding revolutionary violence and that portrayed the true conditions of the workers, revolutionaries and capital. Gleyzer's experimental perspective is perhaps best exemplified in his 1972 *No olvido ni perdón* (Neither Forgive nor Forget), in which he re-narrates a videotaped press conference by guerilla insurgents who were subsequently executed covertly by the military, as a denunciation of the violence of the capi-

talist state. Gleyzer himself was disappeared by the military in 1976. There were numerous reports of him being interned and tortured, even blinded, in a secret prison in Buenos Aires, but his death has never been confirmed. Gleyzer's experimental media deconstructions continued to be shown to members of the military junta as examples of the attitudes of the revolutionaries and the reason they should be eliminated.<sup>6</sup>

Testimony, truth, decolonization, liberation, experiment, aesthetic revolution. These were the key principles and processes of the insurrectionist media legacy of Birri, Solanas, Getino and Gleyzer, contemporaries whose image ideologies and strategies intersected and overlapped. And this is the historical media legacy that was caught in a twenty-five-year ellipsis, suppressed first by military dictatorship and then by Menem's radical and ideological free-marketism, which has re-established itself since the 2001 collapse of the neo-liberal model.

One of the dramatically changed conditions that contemporary Argentinean media insurrectionists faced in 2001 was a fully realized state of multinational information capitalism. It was another incarnation of the neo-liberal model that was theorized and critiqued twenty-five years earlier (notably by Solanas and Getino) as media imperialism. A key component of Menem's brutal application of the model in the 1990s was to enlist national and multinational corporate television interests in his project, which he accomplished by privatizing state-television operations and removing all regulatory controls on media concentration and foreign investment. As a result, Argentina's two leading newspaper publishing companies, Clarín and Atlantida, were each awarded a concession for a privatized state television channel, with Atlantida eventually being sold to US-based CEI-Citigroup. The very profitable cable television industry — cable subscription in Argentina is third highest in the world, after Canada and the US — was multinationalized with the purchase of Cablevisión by US-based investment group TCI, while CEI-Citicorp extended its media control in Argentina by purchasing majority interests in the

other major cable operator, Multicanal. Just before the 2001 collapse, Guillermo Mastrini, leading Argentinean communications analyst and historian, clearly located Menem's actions in the context of the twenty-five-year continuous neo-liberal ellipsis:

The design of communications policies in Argentina over the last twenty-five years has resulted from two related but dissimilar authoritarian experiences: one, the absence of political or social debate under the military dictatorship, where terror produced policies which were manifested in contradictory relations with media owners and were simply imposed on everyone else; and two, a narrowly configured relationship between a corporatist state, legitimized by parliamentary majority, and hegemonic economic interests, an accord which precludes debate in a depoliticized civil society crushed by economic problems. Despite the obvious differences between these two authoritarian forms, it is not possible to understand the political-economic dimensions of contemporary policy logic without acknowledging its roots in the neo-liberal policies instigated by the dictatorship... The current framework of strategies for the realization of the virtual utopia of participation in a global communications network excludes the possibility of introducing any logic other than the logic of the market.<sup>7</sup>

It was within this globalized free market information context, with television flooded with American product and Argentinean media produced almost entirely in collusion with the Menem ideological project, that post-2001 media insurrectionist responses were conceived and enacted.

The first and most immediate media insurrectionist productions to revive the historical liberationist/experimental legacy of the 1960s and 1970s after the 2001 economic collapse can be grouped together loosely in a new media form known as *Cine Urgente* (Urgent Cinema). Using consumer video cameras — in fact any kind of camera available — a number of media collec-

tives formed spontaneously to document the mass uprising and violent state repression, as well as to proclaim the neo-liberal model dead. The collective *Argentina Arde* (Argentina is Burning) produced the short *Solidaridad con Zanon* (Solidarity with Zanon, 2002), a tribute to the Zanon ceramic factory workers who had occupied and were operating their abandoned factory. This short engages history by re-enacting Raymundo Gleyzer's anti-capitalist narration from his 1974 short film *Me matan si no trabajo y si trabajo me matan* (They kill me if I don't work, and if I work they kill me). *Grupo Contraimagen* (Counter-Image Group) also collectively produced the video short *Ceramica Zanon* (Zanon Ceramics, 2001), juxtaposing the productivity of the same worker occupied factory with televised statements by Argentina's imploding finance minister and with images of violence exploding in the streets.<sup>8</sup>

One of the most prolific and enduring of media collectives to contribute to the *Cine Urgente* movement is *Ojo Obrero* (Worker's Eye), associated with the militant national workers movement *Polo Obrero*, much as Gleyzer's film collective was associated with the *Partido Revolucionario de Trabajadores*. *Ojo Obrero*'s video work began with *Argentina: Comienza La Revolución* (Argentina Rebels: The Revolution Begins, 2001), a direct documentation of the mass insurrection of 19 and 20 December 2001, focusing on the formation of motorbike couriers into a popular street force to repel state repression and on the birth of the *Que se vayan todos* movement. Their direct, unmanipulated documentation style was extended in *Asambleas Populares* (People's Assemblies, 2002), which documents a neighbourhood assembly's call for solidarity among all assemblies to form a people's government. One of *Ojo Obrero*'s most elaborate video documents is *Acampe Piquetero* (Picketers Occupation, 2002), which records the peaceful occupation of the main plaza of Buenos Aires by tens of thousands of members of a range of national organizations of workers and unemployed. This piece differs from earlier direct documentation as it is constructed from two perspectives — footage of the event shot by *Ojo Obrero* from inside the occupation, which is intercut

with footage from broadcast television coverage — offering a unique insight into the disjunction between commercial televisual representation and insurrectionist self-representation. *Ojo Obrero* also provides nationwide circulation and screening of their work as both counter-information and do-it-yourself tools.

As the *Cine Urgente* movement grew, so did its organization with the formation of ADOC (*Asociación de Documentalistas* — Association of Documentarians), a collective of collectives, including *Grupo Boedo*, *Cine Insurgente*, *Contraimagen*, *Ojo Obrero*, *Indymedia Argentina* and *Grupo 1° de Mayo*, which amassed visual materials from its members to produce *Por un nuevo cine, por un nuevo país* (For a New Cinema, For a New Country, 2002). This video builds an imagistic overview of the preceding twenty-five years, promiscuously and rapidly intercutting images of various presidents and ministers of finance announcing cuts and privatizations with footage of genocidal generals from the 1976 military dictatorship walking the streets freely. This imagery is juxtaposed with footage of people eating from garbage cans, the looting of food stores and finally the mass insurrection and repression of 2001. The overall effect of this swirling montage is to conjure a historical process of military and economic repression that has deep roots and can only be countered with sustained popular insurrection. This historical understanding was widely taken up in Argentina through screenings of *Por un nuevo cine* in such diverse public spaces as soccer-stadium Jumbotrons and neighbourhood plazas.

The recontextualised liberationist/experimental discourse in the *Cine Urgente* movement was dramatically enhanced in one of the most effective pieces to emerge from the 2001 mass insurrection, *La Bisagra de la Historia* (The Hinge of History, 2002). Produced by the politically unaligned anarchist arts collective *Venteveo* (named after a bird which, according to the pitch of its song, is said to announce either death or birth), this video establishes itself from the outset as an alternative television channel, complete with onscreen identification logo, playing out the concept of counter-information

by rewriting history over television. *La Bisagra* builds slowly from direct street interviews with exasperated people in Buenos Aires on the evening of 19 December 2001, to a documentary montage of the first explosion of thousands into a rhythmic pot-banging collective uprising and drumming fest. As violent police repression grows, the piece pointedly manipulates pirated television footage and the collective's own footage for maximum effect, with freeze frames, slow motion and rapid inter-cutting to the pounding music of Macaco. A particularly emotional sequence in this insurrectionist music video involves a slow motion image of soldiers mounted on horseback, galloping through swirls of smoke and tear gas like the four horsemen of the apocalypse, swinging batons and aiming rifles at running people. After the furious imagery of tanks, molotov cocktails, burning buildings and guns firing, the video collapses into complete silence as a text crawl lists the name, age, occupation, city and cause of death of every citizen killed in the repression. The final section of *La Bisagra* roams through empty streets in a more sombre montage of graffiti messages; "It's not that the enemy is bigger than us, it's just that we are looking at the enemy from on our knees," "This is just the beginning," "If elections really changed anything, they'd already be outlawed," "The only church that can illuminate anything is a church that is burning." The scene builds into a physical attack on a commercial television station that was collaborating with the repressive state. The attack plays out to the chant: "They piss on us and you tell us it's raining!" In the final credits, the *Venteveo* experimental/liberationist television channel steps outside of the globalizing tool of copyright and into the free information commons, encouraging free and widespread

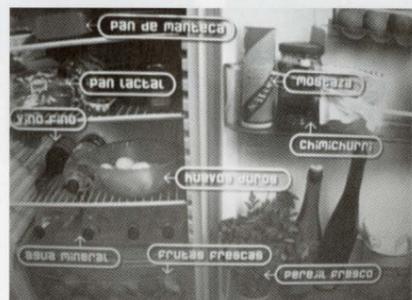
copying and distribution of their work. Within the *Cine Urgente* movement, *La Bisagra* stands as the fullest recuperation of the strategies and objectives of the repressed insurrectionist media from twenty-five years earlier.

In addition to the *Cine Urgente* movement, an equally crucial form of post-collapse media mobilization emerged from the more established video art sector. It is based around the principles of experiment and liberation, but has negotiated a very different relationship with its insurrectionist environment. This effort centres on another collective of young artists, but their video project has no name and is flexible in its composition. The two founding members — Gaston Duprat and Mariano Cohn — form the central core, which other artists, including Federico Mercuri, Adrian De Rosa and Mario Chierico, move in and out of quite fluidly. Duprat and Cohn established unique reputations in the late 1990s as leading media experimenters in both the non-commercial video art world and the highly commercial realm of broadcast television. Their first full collaboration was the 1997 experimental video *Circuito* (Circuit), an elegant and eloquent twenty-minute observational document of the details of daily lives in the province of Bahia Blanca. Part road trip, part examination of bodies in motion and part structural deconstruction of the acts of perception and photography, *Circuito* is a collective human portrait that subverts narrative in favour of representing the phenomena of existence and perception as vital and multiform. In 1999, they deployed this structural-observational-phenomenological-experimental artistic strategy fully in the 100-minute video *Enciclopedia* (Encyclopedia), a non-narrative compendium of three minute chunks of



Stills from *Enciclopedia*, 1999

lives mediated by communications technologies. These range from portraits of portraiture at weddings and birthdays to observations of being observed by building guards and police; or from empty landscapes of pastures and cattle to teenagers reciting a list of their television channels by heart. This map of human experiences inside the video-capitalist state is described by Duprat as “crude, anti-esthetic, boring, no digital intervention, flat, drawn out. Just people speaking. Instead of creating a poetic figure, the environment or the person says it all in three minutes, nothing precious, unedited.” *Enciclopedia* plays across the disjunction between the realist specificities of human experience and the formal structure of techno-observation to construct a new form of dialogue between self-representation and surveillance in the condition of global capitalist information systems.



Stills from Gaston Duprat and Mario Cohn's *Television Abierta*

At the same time, Duprat and Cohn were invited to develop local programming and interstitial materials for the Buenos Aires franchise of Canadian-owned MuchMusic. Applying their successful video-art philosophy of inclusive phenomenological observation to broadcast television, Duprat and Cohn revolutionized the one-way delivery structure of commercial television with the weekly half-hour MuchMusic program *Television Abierta* (Open Television). The program invited anyone and everyone in Buenos Aires to claim three minutes of TV as their own. Their amazingly simple and inexpensive production format involved viewers calling in, booking a videographer and taking complete control over their own presentation; whatever was recorded in three minutes in a single take from a static observational camera was aired unedited on the program. *Television Abierta* content was sometimes extreme, often absurd and always unexpected, including: an elderly woman displaying her drinking-straw hat sculptures, a man in his mid-thirties trying to sell his lemon of a car, a gang of twelve-year-olds breakdancing to their favourite tune and a middle-aged woman demonstrating effective but mean dog training techniques. One of the most successful programs ever on Argentinean television, *Television Abierta* deployed a TV karaoke format as a popular vehicle for people to make their private lives, whatever they might be, public in a city renowned for its labyrinthine enclosure. This experimental urban ethnography project set off a flurry of other related broadcast projects in which Duprat and Cohn turned over creative control of television to the people, including *Mi Abuela* (My Grandmother), *Mi Cuarto* (My Room) and *Mi Heladera* (My Fridge). Each one is a thirty-second unedited portrait in which an ordinary person showed and shared a part of their private lives. Continuing their discourse across the video art/broadcast television divide, Duprat and Cohn targeted themselves and the video art world in *Hágalo Usted Mismo* (Do It Yourself, 2001), a satirical how-to catalogue of video art techniques and conventions — out of focus landscapes, frame in frame, crawling text, water sounds — that deconstructs and demythologizes art. Ironically, it won awards in many video-art festivals.

The December 2001 collapse and mass popular insurrection provoked two important video responses from Duprat and Cohn, which located their experimental/democratic project within the more insurrectionist context of liberation. The first unnamed project consisted of a single image of a hand waving goodbye that was projected at an enormous scale as the speakers' backdrop at a mass public *Que se vayan todos* demonstration. The demonstration was targeted against institutions and corporations and was held in front of the National Congress. This simple image of an unmistakable physical gesture captured imaginations as a symbol of collective opposition much as a fluttering flag might.

Their second post-collapse video, titled simply with the date 20/12 (the second day of the popular insurrection and police repression in 2001) is an experimental reconstructed personal document, a single continuous shot through the viewfinder of a video camera operated by a middle-aged, middle-class man. He plays with his brand new video camera at home, wandering about the apartment, taping his wife, mother-in-law, grandfather, as they do housework, chat with each other, watch TV. We see through his eyes/viewfinder as he records and tries out every preprogrammed image effect; sepia, solarize, fader, overlap, dot, still, flash — the name and the effect overlay the scene being recorded. Finally, he turns his camera on the television to record a live news broadcast of President de la Rúa fleeing Buenos Aires in a helicopter. Superimposed programmed in camera greetings flash over of the televised moment of the end of an era — Welcome, Happy Birthday, Happy Holidays, Congratulations and, finally, The End — as

the helicopter disappears in the distance, while the TV anchor announces the citizen death toll, and the people in the streets chant “Argentina! Argentina!” This simple seven-minute short work pushes experimentation with the observational mode to reveal the convergence of private everyday experience with public insurrection, and displays the multiple, conflicting but determining roles of media technologies in structuring language and narrating experience.

The most extensive experimental and liberationist project undertaken by Duprat and Cohn yet is the launch in June 2003 of the public television channel *Ciudad Abierta* (Open City). The name resonates strongly with Rossellini's innovative neo-realist classic film *Rome Open City*, which radically reformulated the relationship between reality and representation in liberated post-fascist Rome in 1945. In 2002, the Cultural Secretariat of the City of Buenos Aires contracted Duprat and Cohn to construct an inclusive and innovative cultural television channel for the city, within a severely limited budget framework. Masters of the old neo-realist tradition of making the most out of the scarce resources at hand, Cohn and Duprat developed a channel that incorporated their key image philosophy and strategy — collective self-representation by turning control of imagery over to the people. It is on air 24 hours a day, seven days a week with a total start-up cost of \$12,000 CAD and monthly operational costs of \$10,000 CAD. At first glance, *Ciudad Abierta* resembles information stations like the Weather Channel or Toronto's CP24, with a graphic strip for date, time and temperature at the top of the screen, a running information crawl along



Stills from Gaston Duprat and Mario Cohn's *20/12*, 2001



Stills from Gaston Duprat and Mario Cohn's public television channel *Ciudad Abierta*

the bottom of the screen, and an image box in the centre. But any similarity with other channels ends there. First and foremost, the content is entirely concerned with culture, in the broadest and most inclusive sense of the word. Formal culture is divided into eight categories: dance, visual art, music, tango, theatre, film and video, literature, children's events. These categories are represented in two ways: first, in the running crawl of event listings for the day, and second, in a full screen text calendar for each category that changes every five minutes. However, the truly radical experiment in this broadcast project is in its foregrounding of the culture of the everyday. The predominant *En Imagen* (On Screen) image section of the screen is devoted to a constant and constantly changing non-narrative and unnarrated stream of five- to ten-minute unedited observations. These come from an almost infinite range of vantage points and perspectives offered by a city of thirteen-million inhabitants.

A brief listing of some video observations screened over the course of one day on *Ciudad Abierta* illustrates the exploded sense of culture represented: Sunday mass in a church; children play in a park in the middle of a display of electric toy trains; four young men make dinner in their apartment; a green grocer stocks shelves in his store; a street sweeper picks his way through a crowd demonstrating in front of the National Congress, trying to sweep up hundreds of pamphlets; four elderly musicians sing classic tangos in a local bar; a man gets his hair cut; a dog sits in an open window watching street traffic; a series of performers audition for a local staging of *Hairspray*; a tailor prepares a bolt of cloth to make a suit; two women direct car traffic in a parking lot; two young women sit in a park discussing their university

classes. There are no talking-head reporters, no narration, no interpretation. A myriad of everyday events are observed and unfold on their own terms. Intermittently, this flow of everyday life is interrupted by public-service announcements for free condoms and HIV/AIDS education. As well, there are a range of thematically organized interstitial stingers of thirty to sixty seconds: *Protagonistas de Buenos Aires* (Heroes of Buenos Aires), where bus drivers, nurses, bookstore owners describe their jobs; *Sonidos de Buenos Aires* (Sounds of Buenos Aires), an entirely black screen with location sound recordings from train stations, restaurants, parks; *Manzanas de Buenos Aires* (Buenos Aires City Blocks), where a resident walks around their block pointing out friends, stores, their home; *Cine de Buenos* (Buenos Aires Cinema), short clips from feature films shot in Buenos Aires; *Tribus de Buenos Aires* (Tribes of Buenos Aires), featuring Star Trek groupies, Michael Jackson fans, and goth kids, all posed as gangs.

The production device behind this channel is utterly simple and ingenious. There is no studio for *Ciudad Abierta*, the city is the studio. All production staff work out of their homes. At all times there are three videographers roaming the city collecting segments, which are delivered to a compiler who logs the materials as they arrive and then sends unedited computer disks and playlists to the cable service that delivers the signal. As the *Ciudad Abierta* digital image database accumulates over time, the playlists can be compiled from different days and times to offer a historically recombinant cultural signal. New concepts for structuring and presenting materials proliferate. In December 2004, *Ciudad Abierta* launched ZOOM, a series of commissioned single-shot, unedited five-minute video works from 100 artists

— filmmakers, video artists, photographers, performance artists, painters — and plans are currently in development for *Edificios de Buenos Aires* (Buildings of Buenos Aires), a longer form observation of the ongoing relations and interactions of the residents of entire buildings. As well, the Cultural Office of the City of Buenos Aires now publishes a weekly free print and online publication titled *Ciudad Abierta* as well, which exists in a symbiotic relationship with the television channel's cultural calendar. *Ciudad Abierta* is an engaged mutating and collaborative project on a mass scale. It extends the structural-phenomenological-observational experiment in liberating media through redistribution of self-representational processes, which underpins of all of Duprat and Cohn's work.

Almost three years after the 2001 collapse, insurrectional fervour has subsided and Argentina has stabilized somewhat. Many *asambleas populares* have disbanded or transformed into neighbourhood cultural centres, and the *Que se vayan todos* movement has dissipated, but the unemployed *piqueteros* continue to disrupt daily life, most recently with their 25 June occupation of nine McDonalds outlets in Buenos Aires. The new president of Argentina, Nestor Kirchner, is a populist who governs from the left and who, in many ways, draws another kind of direct line between past and present, given his involvement with militant opposition movements in the 1970s. Kirchner's slogan is "Justice and Memory" and he has moved forcefully to bring genocidal military personnel to justice. But Argentina remains in default on its almost \$200 billion international debt, owed to an array of foreign banks, private investors and financial agencies like the IMF and the World Bank. The globalist neo-liberal model has not succumbed anywhere else in the world, and global multinational forces can be expected to fully assert themselves to recuperate their investments. Argentina remains a society in constant flux. The urgency of insurrection may have dissipated, but the people's collective historical memory and self-representations have proliferated. The twenty-five-year ellipsis in which the multiform insurrectionist media practices of Birri, Solanas, Getino and Gleyzer were repressed has

been sutured back into material history in post-2001 Argentina by a range of new insurrectionist media practitioners determined to define a continuous thread between past and present and to revolutionize language, meaning and action. This new post-global media commune, as exemplified by the divergent but complementary experimental and liberatory projects of the multivocal *Cine Urgente* movement and the video art sector, has reformulated the historical legacy of media insurrection. The contemporary incarnation of this legacy has created a productive and progressive dialectic between the mass and the self, between the spontaneous and the structural, and between the embodied local and the global techno-imaginary. Such ongoing liberatory media experiments assure that collective memory continues to simmer and mass action is always close at hand.

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#### Notes

1. Acknowledged as the father of the New Latin American Cinema Movement in the 1950s, Argentinean filmmaker and theorist Fernando Birri has written extensively over the last five decades about the ongoing political and aesthetic revolution in the New Latin American Cinema movement. Fernando Birri, *El Alquimista Democrático* (Santa Fe: Ediciones Sudamerica, 1999), 235.
2. Atilio Boron, "Requiem para el neoliberalismo," in *Página 12* (Buenos Aires: 23 December 2001), 25.
3. Fernando Birri, *El Alquimista Democrático* (Santa Fe: Ediciones Sudamerica, 1999), 233.
4. *Ibid.*, 163.
5. Fernando Solanas, *Cine Cultura y Descolonización* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 1973), 62.
6. Gleyzer's legacy is increasingly being reclaimed and reassessed. His life and work are the subject of the biographical documentary *Raymundo* (2002) as well as the book *El Cine Quema: Raymundo Gleyzer* (Fernando Martín Peña and Carlos Vallina, Ediciones de la Flor, 2000).
7. Guillermo Mastrini, et al., "La política a los pies del mercado: la comunicación en la Argentina de la década del 90," in *Globalización y Monopolios en la Comunicación en América Latina*, Guillermo Mastrini and César Bolaño, eds. (Buenos Aires: Editorial Biblos, 1999), 149.
8. The occupation and self-management of the Brukman and Zanon factories were subsequently taken up as subjects in Avi Lewis and Naomi Klein's 2004 feature documentary on worker self-management in Argentina, *The Take*.

# Cynthia F. Interviews Peter K.

A fictionalized conversation  
between Cynthia Foo and  
Peter Kingstone

**O**n 9 April 2004, an exhibition titled *The Strange Case of Peter K. (1974–2004)* opened in a house on Bellwoods Avenue in Toronto. The show ran each Friday, Saturday and Sunday until 25 April. The house was transformed into a forum for a personal exposé, with videos scattered about the house that revealed facts about Peter K.'s life. The confessional videos were in a bathroom, closet, bedrooms, kitchen, living room, basement and garage. Each included a reference to a mass media event, such as OJ Simpson's trial, the cloning of Dolly the sheep, or the discovery of AIDS, providing the viewer with a sense of where each public event intersects with Peter K.'s life. However, the videos were scattered out of chronological order throughout the house, encouraging visitors to stitch together the fragments to compose a narrative of the life of Peter K.

This is an interview probing the nature of lying, fragmented narratives and the spaces between "You" and "I."



Video still, 911. All images Peter Kingstone, from the installation *The Strange Case of Peter K.*, 2004.

**CYNTHIA FOO:** So, tell me, is Peter K. you? Who is Peter K.?

**PETER KINGSTONE:** Of course, he is me. I'm turning thirty this year. I was born in 1974, in Ottawa and moved to Toronto, I guess it was about twelve years ago.

**CF:** Why Peter K.? Why not "Peter Kingstone?" And why the discussion of your life as if it were a case study?

**PK:** The title *The Strange Case of Peter K. (1974–2004)* recalls *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, a horrific tale of a man with a split personality. The connotation of this recollection is that Peter K. is a split personality of the artist. The idea of the split personality assumes the idea that a true personality exists, from which Peter K. has split. The fragmentation of the self is what interests me — this fragmentation points directly to the idea that there is no true "I," of which everything we do is a manifestation. My argument is that neither Dr. Jekyll nor Mr. Hyde is the true self, nor is either the false self. Because the self is always a creation and reflection, there is no such thing as a true I.

**CF:** That sounds rather existential — would you say that you are adopting a Sartrean approach?

**PK:** Well, no... I think I would say I was an existentialist fifteen years ago, but maybe not now.

**CF:** What happened fifteen years ago?

**PK:** Let me see, I'm trying to remember. Yes, well, the Berlin Wall fell down and I went to Japan. I was in Japan at the time, I'd gone on a school trip, and at that point in Japan, I spent much of my time alone; you get very lonely if you don't speak the language. You can't see that many temples, you know. So, at that point I started to really be ostracized from everyone around me, so therefore, existentialism seemed like a very good idea.

*In the entrance hallway, a video projection plays on a loop, a slideshow of the supposed Japanese trip that Peter K. took as a schoolboy. Peter K. muses on what he might do with his life, and discusses becoming a Buddhist.*

**CF:** That doesn't sound like a convincing reason.

**PK:** I'll try another one! Also, I went to a psychologist (psychiatrist? Psychologist, I think it was). It was the typical Freudian thing, I lay on the couch and the guy was behind me, whispering questions in my ear. He kept trying to ask me about sexual experiences, and I felt so estranged from the world that all I could respond with was memories of violent bar fights.

**CF:** Why does sex equate with violence?

**PK:** I don't think sex equates with violence. Well, maybe it *does* equate with violence. Sex and violence are always integrally linked in mass media; in every horror film you see, or in any popular movie. I think we're taught that sex is a violent act — even the language around it can be quite violent.

**CF:** Is that why you made your piece about seeing that psychiatrist? When he asked you about your first sexual experience, all you could talk about was getting into a bar fight?

**PK:** Yeah, it's quite possible. You might be a better psychiatrist than he!

*Upstairs in the bedroom, a tiny monitor placed in an opened closet plays a video of a man with his head covered, seated in a steamy room. The man is masturbating. Peter's voice calmly narrates the scene, "This is the other [sex] fantasy. I... I didn't want to show you this; I hadn't told anybody about this. These thoughts also make me so angry. I don't know what to do — I want to shoot someone sometimes when my mind thinks back. The thought about him — but this thought also makes me hard. I love my wife; I love having sex with her. I want to have a child with her. I... I don't know."*

**CF:** So, let's talk a bit about Peter K. You're married to Lisa, right?

**PK:** Yes, we're still married. She works at an advertising firm on Bay Street.



Video still, *Berlin Wall*.



Video still, *Columbine High*.



Video still, Tiananmen.



Video still, Princess Diana.



Video still, Release of Thriller.

**CF:** A friend of yours was surprised to see that you are married to Lisa; he told me that he thought you only dated boys. How does Lisa feel about all of this?

**PK:** [laughs] Oh my god. Sorry. What were you saying?

*Am I being too coy? Should I be more direct, do you think?*

*Think about lying a bit more; but I think you're doing fine.*

**CF:** So, why did you choose these moments to make videos out of your life? Which moments stand out the most?

**PK:** I thought of them mostly because of the media events that they followed; the media seemed to construct the moment, rather than the moment in and of itself. Some of the videos are titled *The Death of Elvis Presley*, *The Release of Thriller*, *The Discovery of AIDS*, and *Death of Princess Diana*; the videos are related to these media events.

**CF:** Do these particular events mean something to you?

**PK:** Well all of the events are contemporary, meaning they all happened at different times during the thirty years of my life. And they have meaning to me because they have meaning to everybody. They were very well-publicized events, from the death of Elvis to the World Trade Centre falling down, and everything in between. The events played out on my television screen and also constructed and structured my life.

**CF:** Which ones are the ones that you go back to again and again?

**PK:** I find myself recently going back to Princess Diana. I'm not sure why. It's definitely a fairy tale. It seems so unreal and so glossy and so mediated. I always remember back to her funeral, which I didn't watch, but I remember my mother watching, and her commenting that she had watched the wedding with me. And then a week later after Princess Diana died, Mother

Teresa died, and the world had to deal with a similar funeral with Mother Teresa. It was very strange because it was as if the media had second thoughts or some kind of conscience, which is difficult for a media to have, but there was a sense that they had to concentrate on Mother Teresa's funeral as much as Princess Diana's. But I don't think Elton John wrote a song about Mother Teresa. I wish he had though. But I don't think people remember how she died, or what personal details there might have been about her life.

**CF:** I found this postcard that depicts Princess Diana, literally, as the Queen of Hearts. It's a photograph of her head stuck onto the body of the playing-card Queen of Hearts. I think it's interesting how Princess Diana is represented as larger than life: she is not just a person.

**PK:** Yes, she is a construction. But I think it's interesting not just how Princess Diana is a media construction, but how we are each constructions of each other; your sense of me has more to do with you than it does me.

**CF:** So, what is your construction? What are you trying to present to me right now?

**PK:** I'm trying to present a question of identity, to present questions. I think it's important for us to realize that we don't have a holistic identity — we're not even in control of who we are. And that we are very many people at the same time. Our identity is fragmented and cobbled together.

**CF:** And that identity, as you alluded to earlier, is one that's cobbled together by other people, not by ourselves?

**PK:** We exist with other subjects, and *they* construct who we are as much as we construct who we are. With these videos, I hope to look at how identity is created and explore ideas around the creating of identity and if that identity can be stable. I think it's up to the viewer to decide if Peter K. becomes a stable identity or not, but my personal opinion is that Peter K. doesn't become a stable identity.

*In the garage, a video plays of Peter's blond, muscled father pumping iron, a dutiful trainer watching him. Peter's father recalls how he was a Canadian bodybuilder of some repute, and of his wishes that Peter would somehow be encouraged to also take up bodybuilding. Instead, Peter, dressed in a bathrobe, one day entertains mum and dad with his rendition of Michael Jackson's Thriller. Peter's father recalls, "I was so embarrassed for him, I couldn't watch."*

*A cramped room in the basement contains a video of text beginning with "I hope my son..." superimposed on a looping video of a boy running toward the swimming pool, only to trip and fall short of the water, bouncing ungracefully off the cement floor.*

**CF:** How do the videos of your parents figure into Peter K.'s life? You have two videos that are not in Peter's voice; one in the garage of your father pumping iron, and one in the basement of your mother's wishes and hopes for how you might have grown up.

**PK:** Oh yeah, my parents and I have always had a good relationship. My dad always wanted me to be a dancer, he never wanted me to be an athlete.

**CF:** But that's the opposite of what is depicted in your *The Release of Thriller* video — your mother is the one who seems excited about you being a dancer; meanwhile your dad is horrified at your having performed Michael Jackson's *Thriller* in your bathrobe.

**PK:** I guess you're right. But I don't think it's all that important to be truthful.

**CF:** Why is lying important to you? Why do you lie? One might lie to deal with facts that are difficult to face up to, when one is trying to hide; or one may exaggerate, to make oneself look better. Whose expectations are you trying to live up to?

**PK:** I look at lying in a different way. I would rather say there is no such thing as truth, so therefore everything is a lie. Even when you're lying to fit someone's expectations, the truth is also a lie, because it paints a picture of



Video still, *Assassination of Lennon*.

you that you have inside. I mean, if I went to a job interview and told them I knew how to fix a car because I knew it would get me the job, they'd have to see whether or not I could fix a car, even if I know I have no idea how to fix a car. At the same time, there are people in my life who have seen me fiddle around with a car and get it start going again, so these people might think that I can actually do the job.

*Another video titled "The Assassination of John Lennon" plays in the basement. It is of a sunlit beach; a woman waves to the camera, smiling. She turns and enters the water, swimming into the distance. Peter's voice narrates, "My entire family went on vacation to Wasaga beach. Only two of us returned. My sister, really my half-sister — my mother had gotten pregnant when she was fifteen — never came back. My sister was my closest friend; she taught me all the words to this Beatles song."*

*Peter proceeds to sing "When I'm Sixty-Four," stumbling along and misremembering words and phrases while his sister gradually vanishes into the distance.*

**CF:** Why should I care who Peter K. is? What does it matter what happens to him? Why should I care to think about him as a person?

**PK:** You probably shouldn't care who Peter K. is. But the story that comes through might mesh with your life and connect with people you know, or maybe parts of your life that you know. In this case, you can be intrigued by that connection. I think asking questions is

the first step towards knowledge. Not that any of the questions need to be answered, but truth is what we all agree upon. It's constantly changing.

**CF:** If you're talking about knowledge, do you believe in the truth, then? Is there a truth or truths? How do you see knowledge?

**PK:** Believe? I believe in many things. For example, there are scientific beliefs we can have — gravity, and Einstein's theories — and even these aren't signified as truths *per se*, they're called theories — theories and premises which may or may not be proven by empirical data (data that is in turn scrutinized and subject to interpretation).

Belief's an interesting question. I mean, I've never held any religious beliefs in particular, but I think that religion would add a lot to my life. I think I could easily become a Buddhist and reinscribe my life to being a Buddhist, but I'm not interested in taking my life that way. I am aware that I might be considered to be complicating my life by having many different truths, or in being relative about truths and about being sloppy in separating these "truths" from each other, but then again, I've never wanted an easy existence or an easy life; I'd rather have a full one.

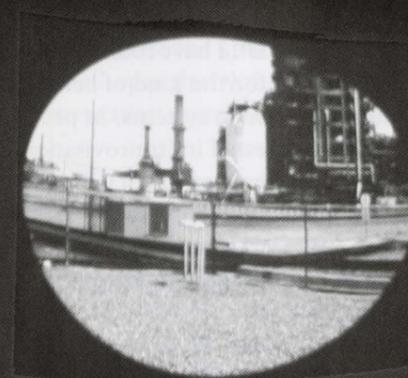
*Cynthia Foo is a PhD candidate in visual and cultural studies at the University of Rochester. Her research areas are on globalization and race and she has recently become interested in the means by which slippages and misrepresentations function to disrupt static categories of identity. She has written exhibition catalogue essays and worked for many different art galleries, including the Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, the Art Gallery of York University and the National Gallery of Canada.*

*Peter Kingstone is an artist, curator and writer based in Toronto. He has just completed two solo shows, *The Strange Case of Peter K.* (1974-2004) and *One-A-Day* at Prefix Gallery supported by Trinity Square Video. He is interested in questions about narrative and the construction of identity.*

## Fugitive II — What Runs Underneath?

### Natasha Dwyer in Conversation with Simon Penny

Simon Penny, *Fugitive II*, installation, 2003. Photo: Ronald Aveling. Courtesy: Australian Centre for the Moving Image



In Simon Penny's new installation, *Fugitive II*, an image projected onto a circular wall slides back and forth in response to the visitor's movement. The visitor and the system enter into a bodily dialogue. Underlying the installation is a custom-built machine-vision system. The original *Fugitive* project was begun in 1995 at Carnegie Mellon University and further developed in 1997 at ZKM in Karlsruhe, Germany. *Fugitive II* was recently installed at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image.

**NATASHA DWYER:** What sort of metaphors does *Fugitive II* use? I think it is about fleeing a spotlight and finding fleeting moments that can't be captured. Is that what you intended?

**SIMON PENNY:** The behaviour of the system is fugitive. As you approach it you can get to a certain distance from the image and it will run away from you. This is one of the behaviour qualities of the machine.

Also, I like the term fugitive because it refers to the sense of vision being fugitive. I am conscious of the fact that we have a very persuasive visual sense of the world, but in fact it is complete fiction. Remember that there are two big blind spots right in the middle of our visual field that we never see, but they must obviously be there. In addition we have the perception that the entire visual field is in focus when in fact the only area that is ever in focus equates to about the size of your thumbnail when your arm is held out at full length. It is a tiny area that is actually in focus. In addition, when your eye saccades, you are effectively blind while your eye is in motion. So if the eye looks and then moves, in the process of the movement you are receiving no visual stimuli. We walk around thinking there is a coherent world out there but all of it is a construction.

When you navigate *Fugitive* you are looking at one selection of video from a database of videos. It offers a panoramic view at various levels of detail around 360 degrees of the installation. So the question: is that enough to give you sense that you are somehow in the place or that you know the place? Is it just a set of fragmented images that are being thrown up on the screen? Or is it a combination of physical movement and the content of the images that builds a coherent world?

**ND:** How do you go about selecting the video sequences?

**SP:** The choice of video locations was difficult. First of all I wanted to avoid any possibility that there was a narrative embedded in the experience. I believe that attempts to combine traditions of narrative moving image and techniques of interactivity are inherently problematic and bound to fail. We have a tradition of 100 years of linear narrative in film, which is based on another 1,000 years of narrative literature. We are deeply acculturated to narrative. Narrative requires that the audience is passive and takes no action. So when you begin to create a new cultural form in which the user takes action and perturbs the system, it

becomes really problematic to combine externally imposed narrative with the narrative the user is creating themselves by exploring the database. I am really troubled by that and I want to stand up and say those people who think interactive media is just an "add-on" to linear narrative image technologies are just wrong.

We are in this moment — and have been in this moment for fifteen years — where it is possible to build a new type of cultural practice that is interactive. We are building a medium that has behaviour. We are building a medium that senses its relationship to the world in realtime and reconfigures itself. It is a completely new form. I don't think enough people are paying attention to the deeper questions. This is a new aesthetic modality — how do you design behaviour? How do you construct a context in which the system will behave in a way that we will come to regard as being culturally rich? How do you construct a situation where the system is perceived by the user as being culturally rich in the responses to what the user does? Does the user perceive their behaviour with respect to the system as satisfyingly rich? A filmmaker or novelist never had to answer these new questions.

In *Fugitive II* the narrative is carved out by the visitor's movement through space.

**ND:** How do you go explore and experiment with the aesthetics of behaviour? Do you observe how people behave in the analog world?

**SP:** I have looked hard for where we might find models for the kind of behaviours that we want to generate in such systems, in pre-digital contexts. I am really interested in improvisation. Improvisation is an unrequited bastard son of various art forms, but I think that it is only there that there is serious addressing of how you take part in a cultural work that is evolving across time. I think that the models are likely to be ecological and social.

**ND:** What do you think of ritual as an example of a social behaviour?

**SP:** That depends on how you define ritual.

**ND:** A procedure that someone does every day, and that those members of the intended audience group for the interactive can understand, for instance, brushing teeth.

**SP:** The word procedure is important because if we talk about ritual as a social procedure then it maps onto the notion of the algorithm, routine or program. Because when we are talking about building automated behaviour at some point you have got to write the code. Code is about writing a set of procedures for the computer to follow.

**ND:** Can improvisation be seen as an in-between space, between the cause and effect of computer process? Does improvisation mean that the in-between space is somewhat out of control?

**SP:** This is one of the problems with working with computers as a medium, because traditionally computing has not been interested in those situations. If you are calculating the trajectories of projectiles or doing accounting then you don't want a situation where the system is making wild guesses or doesn't know. You need certainty. The machinery that we use to build computer artworks was never designed by artists or for artistic purposes. We're borrowing technology from other contexts. We are trying to make art with adding machines, archiving tools with office automation and military tools. I'm not convinced you could adapt existing systems to accommodate the kind of space between the if and then. One hopes that you can, and that there is a lot of experimentation going on in this area.

**ND:** Critiquing the technology you are using is central to your work. How else does *Fugitive II* critique the technology it uses, besides its comment on how we think that we see?

**SP:** A central motivation for me is to try and model

what computational systems seem incapable of doing, and try to make systems that do these things. When we look at conventional technology of the desktop we are forced to sit in a fixed location, stare with fixed focal length at a small visible area and reduce our bodily movement to the movement of our fingers pressing little buttons entering alphanumeric data. That's the way we conventionally interact with computers. What that means is that if we can't encode what we want into the computer as alphanumeric data then the computer actively filters out or represses those desires and that is totally unacceptable. Because if I as an artist want to capture an expansive gesture or a particular emotion but there is no way of capturing that in the existing technology, then the technology is bad and is not supporting my creative practice but repressing it. You can't take on all of that — that is a huge thing. Because we are human beings we move about in the world, we look at each other, we manage a social distance, we take big strides up the stairs, we have this way of expressing our intelligence, and our relationships to each other and the world through bodily movements — we are embodied beings. The computer doesn't know that or relate to it.

The basic premise of *Fugitive II* is to build a computational system in which a person can move around and do what a person in space does; moving fast, moving slow and exploring. The system understands what that is and responds to the user with an output that the user understands as directly related to their real-time behaviour. You don't have to learn a special symbolic language or strap on special equipment. You don't have to learn how to manipulate certain types of input devices. You just walk in and do what you want to do and the system responds in a way that communicates that the system is interpreting your behaviour in a meaningful way.

**ND:** How does *Fugitive II* differ from *Fugitive I*?

**SP:** The conceptual goal of providing an environment where a person can leap about in a room and have a video image change in position and content according



Simon Penny, *Fugitive II*, installation, 2003. Photo: Ronald Aveling. Courtesy: Australian Centre for the Moving Image

to the person's movements is the same. Apart from the underlying structural idea everything in *Fugitive II* is new.

*Fugitive I* was built on a 486 PC, in 1996. It was a single camera looking up into a hemispherical mirror looking at the whole space.

In *Fugitive II* we have a new multi-camera vision system that builds a 3D model of the user rather than a 2D representation. We have a new motion-control system, a new video database, and new behaviour logic. All of the technologies have been re-invented from the ground up for this piece.

It is important that *Fugitive* does not respond to the raw position of a person in space — it is about dynamics. Interactives that are naive tend to trigger things on the basis of position. It doesn't matter if you fell over to get there or if you leapt through the air or if you slithered along the ground. That is stupid, it doesn't matter if you were ten feet from the wall or twenty feet. What does matter is if you were feeling excited or whether you were feeling depressed or whether you bumped

into someone. *Fugitive* tries to attend to those things — aspects related to one's embodied experience of space, which is different to conceiving of the world as a checkerboard and only considering what square you are on at the moment.

**ND:** Do you think there is such thing as an interactive language? And if so do you think this is beneficial?

**SP:** I think inevitably certain modalities of interactivity have already ossified — technologies do that. They don't do it when they are optimal — they do it when they are adequate. For instance if you look at the automobile interface, there is argument on how it could be better — but it doesn't matter; the current interface is embedded into culture. It becomes stuck. The desktop interface is also stuck — there was a fluid period in the seventies and eighties and then it got nailed down. The point-and-click interface on the web is adequate so it won't change much either.

The kind of work I do is dedicated to providing novel sorts of interfaces and modalities of interactivity. I always present a problem to the user of working out what the hell is going on and that means as a designer I'm responsible for creating systems that are easy to learn. The way you are perturbing the system must be communicated back in a way that is not confusing. I want people to become fluid with the system and then be able to play with it. I am infuriated by systems where the user can't discern what effect is being made by the actions and what is random. That is just bad design.

**ND:** Do you think that as it requires a particular skill set and an amount of research and development to create interactives with depth, as a result only a certain types of people have access to making this type of artwork and this will result in certain forms of artwork being made?

**SP:** No, I think it is getting easier and easier. When we started building *Fugitive I* in 1996, the concept of real-time machine vision interaction was audacious. Computer vision was still regarded as a significant

problem. Now you can buy a camera for your PC that uses reasonably complex machine vision algorithms. Things are moved rapidly, techniques are better known and are more available to people with a lower skill level.

Very slowly, educational institutions are recognizing that there is a need for a range of practices and that there needs to be a range of educational experiences to support this. I believe such an educational program has to have rigorous technical training — not just knowing how to use software but how to write it. You need to be able to make your own tools not just use other people's. A program needs to provide a good understanding of aesthetics and creative practice. There are too many naive media art pieces without a theoretically sound basis. This includes a whole range of historical and theoretical areas including social history of technology, inquiries into the relationship between technology and culture, technology and politics, technology and economy. All those things are critical. In my opinion, if an educational program cannot offer such an interdisciplinary range then you are not training someone with the adequate set of skills to really be able to do this stuff.

**ND:** Do you think there is a place for artists to be able to make rich interactive experiences with the keyboard and mouse set-up?

**SP:** There is plenty of possibility to make interesting work within all sorts of constraints. There is a certain kind of creative mind for whom the constraints of the medium are an exciting context to work in, to work with subtlety within tight formal constraints. By temperament I am not that sort of person. I model things that are outside the edge of the envelope. I'm more interested in challenging the boundaries of genres and cross-fertilizing genres than working within genres.

*Natasha Dwyer is a lecturer at Victoria University in Australia and an interface designer. She is currently working on an online documentary to support an eight-part television series about youth homelessness.*

## Jeff Thomas: A Study of Indian-ness

Gallery 44, Toronto  
6 May – 5 June 2004  
review by Margot Francis



Jeff Thomas, *FBI, The Bear Portraits*, 1987, gelatin silver print

When Jeff Thomas was growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, anthropologists used to come to the Six Nations reserve where his grandmother lived and photograph the elders. Thomas recalls that these early encounters produced a difficult legacy, because the anthropologists “took something and left. There was never an exchange of any kind.” In his recent show, *A Study of Indian-ness*, Thomas’s photographs invite a very different kind of engagement. Indeed, his work asserts an Aboriginal presence in the very place where “Indians” were not supposed to exist. For despite the fact that roughly one-quarter of Aboriginal Canadians live in cities, art that explores the intersection of urban spaces and Aboriginal experience is still rare. In this context, *A Study of Indian-ness* plays with and against a myriad of popular representations of “the Indian” while also unsettling the very assumptions that have fuelled this iconic practice.

Thomas has a penchant for hunting down those images that encapsulate what European-Canadian settlers have often called “our Indians.” From the iconic images of Edward Curtis and George Catlin to the banal Indian fort of many a Canadian childhood and the kitschy but still popular “cigar store Indians,” Thomas’ curatorial and photographic practice illustrates how “Indian-ness” is both taken for granted backdrop in North American

culture and a veritable sub-industry of commercialization and display. In the show at Gallery 44, one wall of the gallery was painted a deep red to mimic the tone of the colonial study. Here Thomas re-presented a myriad of “official” images of the “Indian”: on the crest of the Bank of Montreal; in the sculpture overlooking the entrance to the justice department on Parliament Hill; in the frieze on the side of the Air Canada building in Toronto; and the Huron scout kneeling at the feet of Champlain at Nepean Point in Ottawa. These images return the viewer’s gaze to those representations European-Canadian settlers configured, for a second, haunting, look. But unlike documentary representations, Thomas’ photographic juxtapositions invite viewers to look back with a difference. For example, *The Indian Scout*, which pictures the Indian figure at the feet of the Champlain monument, shows the Scout *himself* monumentalized, with the rays of the sun catching his chiselled features. He gazes across the river at his nemesis, the Canadian parliament buildings. The gaze is resolute: indeed, in Thomas’ reconfiguration this “Indian” is no longer “ours” at all.

Other photographs are more humorous. For instance, a series of images juxtapose the tiny plastic Indian figures from children’s cowboy and Indian toy sets against monumental backdrops, in settings that range from the British Museum to the skyscrapers of New York to the skyline of Toronto. In these compositions toy Indian men brandishing tomahawks are shot close-up and from below, and they take on a remarkable and threatening quality of “realism.” Indeed, the photographs seem to reverberate with the cry, “The Indians are coming, the Indians are coming,” bringing the echo of Hollywood Westerns right into the heart of contempo-



Jeff Thomas, *Place d'Armes, Montreal, Indians On Tour*, chromogenic print, 1999

rary urban culture. Similarly the catalogue for this show has a cover photograph that juxtaposes a red-and-white railway car with another toy Indian figure. Once again, the toy “Indian” is larger than life. His arms are crossed over his chest as he looks thoughtfully out of the picture. Printed on the side of the railway car behind him are the words Memory Junction and cn Serves All Canada. If the previous images ironically render the return of the savage to the urban jungle, this photograph is a delicate commentary on the ways in which “Indian-ness” is both integral to and deeply estranged from the memory of the railway and the nation.

In Richard William Hill’s wonderful catalogue essay for this show he highlights the ways in which “the white man’s



Jeff Thomas, *Memory Junction*, Ontario, 2003, chromogenic print

Indian" has long served as a site onto which European-Canadians have projected their fears, obsessions and repressed desires in relation to sexuality. And several of Thomas's photographs in this show speak to that dynamic directly. In an image of the Samuel de Champlain monument from Orillia, we see a Jesuit priest holding a cross over the bodies of two partially naked and sensuously carved Aboriginal men. The priest brandishes his cross like a whip. In *Where Have You Been My Brave Indian?* Thomas provides a voluptuous close-up of the Huron guide (from the Champlain monument in Ottawa) emphasizing his chiselled shoulders, bulging biceps and rippling chest muscles. Juxtaposed with

the photograph is a contemporary romance novel (purchased at Chapters in 2002) where an Aboriginal man serves as the "love object" for a white woman. In the notes for the show, Thomas has excerpted segments from the novel that represent the erotic excitement of this cross-racial encounter: "When he began moving her hand on his sex, and saw the fire of pleasure leap into his eyes, she became lost in a passion she had never known before." For the presumed white, female reader, the well-muscled Aboriginal male signifies a twin set of dangers and desires: the fear of a raw and potentially violent sexual primitivism together with the lure of erotic pleasure. Thomas' juxtaposition of the historic

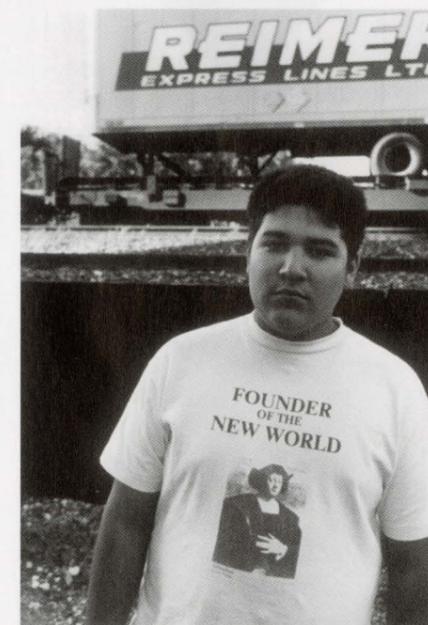
statue and the contemporary novel draws out the implicit parallels between these seemingly different objects. However, the pairing also pokes fun at the earnest sobriety and anxious guilt that often characterize Canadian attempts to rehabilitate historic monuments.<sup>1</sup> For while the juxtaposition critiques the primitivization of Aboriginal men, it also *intensifies* the specifically erotic aspects of the image. Indeed, I would argue that here Thomas' photographs direct the viewer's gaze to the primitivizing process itself, where the "Indian's" sexualized body functions as a form of visual and social confrontation inviting the audience to interrogate the cartography of both their own nostalgia and their desire.

A separate alcove in Gallery 44 was set aside to highlight Thomas' ongoing series of photographs of his son Bear, and the first image in this space is a photograph of Hayter Reed, the deputy superintendent general of Indian affairs from 1893–97. Reed had a crucial role in the history of Indian residential schools and thus in the legacy of state intervention in relation to Aboriginal children. The photograph Thomas has chosen shows him at the Governor General's Historical Fancy Dress Ball in Ottawa in 1896 dressed as the Iroquoian Chief Donnacona. It was Donnacona who first greeted Jacques Cartier on his voyage down the St. Lawrence in 1534 and whose village, Kanata, became the namesake for Canada. Reed made his mark by lobbying for at least two crucial amendments to the Indian Act. In 1894 the Act was changed to ensure that all Aboriginal children were compelled to attend school, usually residential schools, and those parents who refused to give up their children were levied with fines or imprisonment. And in 1895 another amendment made "both the potlatch and the prairie dances indictable offences."<sup>2</sup> By the late 1800's it was already common for white people to "play Indian," so Reed's own performance of "Indianness" at the Governor General's Ball in Ottawa in 1896 should not surprise us. But what is striking is the *juxtaposition* between Reed's "Indian" performance and his determined attempt to separate First Nations people from their own cultures — it was Reed's intervention to ensure compulsory residential schools and to criminalize religious and ceremonial practices that made it illegal for First Nations peoples to maintain their heritage themselves.

Thomas' response to Reed's legacy comes with a series of images of Bear in relation

to a host of contemporary and historical artefacts: t-shirts of the five-hundredth anniversary of Christopher Columbus' arrival, urban graffiti about cultural revolution, one way signs in front of the parliament buildings, historical images and quotes by Edward Curtis. Each constitutes a visual invitation to consider how certain markings of racialized identity cannot be separated from the historical images that ghost them. For instance, in one photograph titled *FBI – Bear with Indian Scout* we see Bear with a "full-blooded Indian" t-shirt defiantly posed at the Champlain monument, his arm casually flung across the scout's knee, signifying his identification with the Huron brave at the same time as his stance as an Aboriginal rapper reconfigures stereotypic imaginings about the stoic and silent "Indian." While Bear embodies the '90s impulse to herald identity as performative, the photograph suggests that the urbane rapper is still inextricably bound up with these earlier representations of "Nativeness." At the same time, Bear's in-your-face stance presents a hybrid culture that is defiantly and irreverently reinscribing itself.<sup>3</sup>

The final image in the ongoing Bear series comes in the form of two photographs encased in a magnificent light box shaped as an open book, tilted up on the floor in the middle of the gallery space. The *Inter/section Book* contained dual images: one side shows a photograph of the Indian scout at the Champlain monument in Ottawa, on the other, Bear is shown seated on the same pedestal vacated by the scout when the statue was moved in response to a protest by the Assembly of First Nations. While the monumental book figures as a larger-than-life canon of national memory, it also provokes questions. Bear's move into the space vacated by the Indian statue



Jeff Thomas, *Founder of the New World, The Bear Portraits*, silver gelatin print, 1989

invites us to reimagine the ways in which both "Indianness" and Canadianness might be configured.

Thomas' photographs are intended to provoke dialogue. From the kitschy and chameleon-like "Indians" in popular culture, to the tame yet still eroticized statues in official representations, to the assertively performative Bear portraits, all of Thomas' work is a deeply engaging meditation on the paradoxes of image making. And none more so than the portraits that conclude this show. One of these is a photograph of Josiah Hill and family by Sir Francis Knowles, a white photographer who worked for the Canadian Geological Survey in the early 1900s. Knowles brought a eugenic philosophy to his work recording the human and mineral resources of the new country. Amazingly, though, he was also a compelling photographer whose images of the Hill family and others suggest not a pitiable vanishing race but a deeply dignified and rapidly modernizing people. Juxtaposed with Knowles' photograph, Thomas has included a self-portrait. The image is set adjacent to the National Archives in Ottawa, and in it, the artist's body is a blur in motion, his limbs intersecting with the gnarled branches of an old tree. The photograph beside this is titled *Avebury, England 2003*, and shows the great hunched back of two Stonehenge-like rocks from Avebury, near where Sir Francis Knowles grew up. Glancing from one image to the next the oversized English stones echo the artist's own broad shoulders and frame. Thus Thomas' long dance with "Indian-ness" is juxtaposed with the indigenous totems of an earlier white photographer's birthplace. Aesthetics and ethics intersect, and frame a question. What is it to be "indigenous" to a place, and what are the ethical conditions that frame that knowing?

*Margot Francis is an SSHRC postdoctoral fellow at York University and has just taken up a position as assistant professor of sociology at Trent University. Her writing explores the intersections of race, gender, sexuality and Canadianness in popular and historic emblems of national identity.*

#### Notes

1. Here my analysis is indebted to Allan J. Ryan, *The Trickster Shift: Humour and Irony in Contemporary Native Art* (UBC Press: Vancouver/Toronto, University of Washington Press, Seattle, 1999), 3–12.
2. Brian Titley, "Hayter Reed and Indian Administration in the West," R.C. Macleod, ed., *Swords and Ploughshares: War and Agriculture in Western Canada* (Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press, 1993), 135.
3. Here my analysis is indebted to Gerald McMaster's catalogue essay, *Portraits from the Dancing Grounds* (Ottawa: The Ottawa Art Gallery, 11 July – 8 September 1996).

## Black Hair/Her-Stories and Joscelyn Gardner's Inverted Portraits

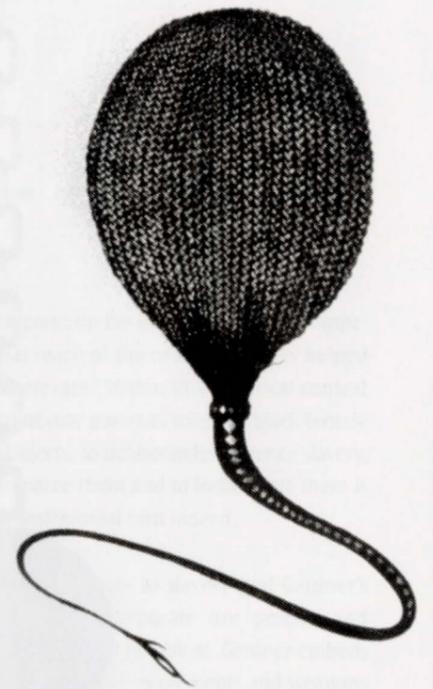
*Barbados Museum and Historical Society, St Ann's Garrison, St Michael, Barbados  
17 – 22 May 2004  
review by Charmaine Nelson*

Joscelyn Gardner's lithographs deal with hair. Not just any hair, but black female hair. Her prints, stark black against white ground, offer a delicate intricacy of patterns, evoking the strength and texture of well groomed manes. But these tidy styles are also unsettling for the evidence of slavery that are tangled in their strands.

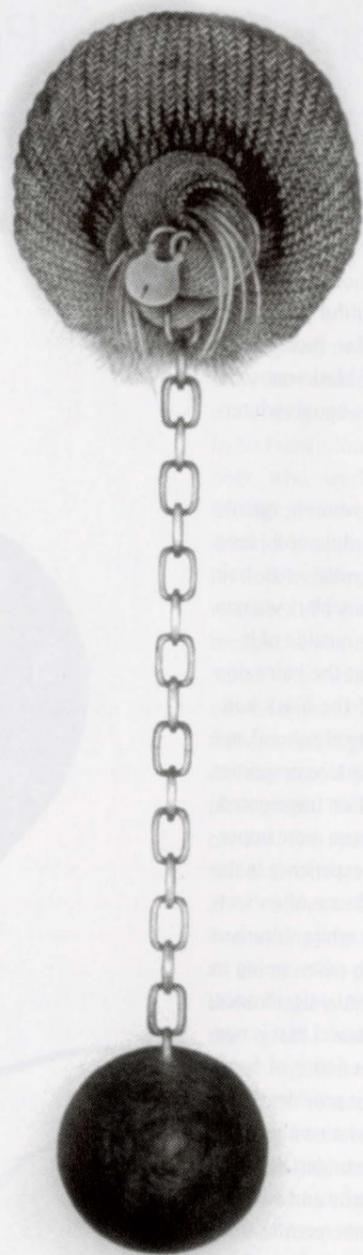
I fancy myself a bit of a black-hair expert — a status achieved through experience more than practice. Since the age of twelve, I have experienced natural platted styles, perms, (jerry) curls, braided extensions, weaves, a shaved head and most recently dreads. The significant milestones in my life are often connected in my memory to the hairstyles that accompanied them. Hair can be a complicated thing for women and for black women even more so.<sup>1</sup> Black *female* hair has been historically tied to issues of gender and sexuality in ways that make it a difficult and often troubling bodily zone in terms of how femininity is constructed. The result is that black female hair operates as an overdetermined sign, binding us to our race and culture through its visibility and corporeality. As Kobena Mercer argues, "within racism's bipolar codification of human value, black people's hair has been historically devalued as the most visible stigma of blackness, second only to skin."<sup>2</sup> The stereotype of "good" and "bad" hair, which is code for straighter-equals-

whiter-equals-more beautiful goes hand in hand with the similar hierarchical obsession with degrees of blackness, code for lighter complexions-equals-whiter-equals-more beautiful.

Although many black women openly lament the often painful and long processes of "dealing with" our hair (almost every contemporary black woman in the West — and many outside of it — can tell stories of being at the hair salon "all day"), the context of the black hairdresser is an important site of cultural and social exchange within black communities that are often dispersed or fragmented. The black hairdresser is even more important within the diasporic experience in the West, where black people are often scattered within dominantly white suburban or rural settings. In such cases, going to the hairdresser takes on ritual significance, not only because of the travel that is necessary, but also the experience of being "in" the community that it provides. These sites are places of black-hair milestones, where "experiments" are undertaken and female passage to maturity and womanhood is marked. Sadly, until recently, these "passages" implied the "relaxing" or "perming" of our natural hair textures. This has often represented a move toward assimilation traditionally marked by the rejection of the black corporeal sign of hair through the transformation of its



Joscelyn Gardner, *Phibbah*, lithograph on frosted mylar, 2002 - 2003 (Detail).



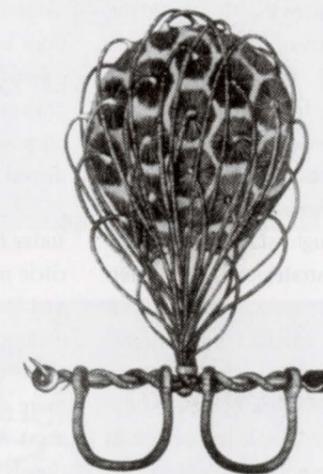
Joscelyn Gardner, *Zebby*, lithograph on frosted mylar, 2002 - 2003 (Detail).

original “kinky” texture. This shift in texture also signalled a hoped for shift in weight and movement — consider the white female models in contemporary shampoo commercials who flip their hair, excitedly demonstrating its body, and thus health and vitality.

Gardner’s lithographs recall the “simple time” before the dominance of chemical straightening. But the word recall is deceptive, suggesting a past that Gardner’s prints do not represent in a complete or easy way. Oddly, these prints also represent a possible contemporary recuperation of past styles. They stand as both colonial and post-colonial (temporally and symbolically). What is immediately striking is the intricacy and delicacy of the complex styles that Gardner evokes in masterful detail, capturing both the quality of a black aesthetic and the property of hair texture that can be read as “natural.” What is most intriguing is how these women come to be individuated by the intricacy of the distinct hair styles that serve to differentiate them, and how the sign of hair becomes the dominant mark of race in “portraits” that do not reveal faces. Although it is not explicitly coded, there is the sense that these hairstyles are recuperable to specific African or black diasporic cultures and representative of a heterogeneous experience. In this deliberate shift, Gardner refuses the primacy of the West’s colonial dependence upon skin colour as the dominant means of “knowing” a body as raced. Interestingly, the specificity of an identifiable black-hair aesthetic allows us to read race on to the unseen faces without the help of skin. Yet they raise questions for the viewer too: what type of face do you envision, how are our own racial identifications complicit in this visual imagining and how are race and



Joscelyn Gardner, *Princess*, lithograph on frosted mylar, 2002 - 2003



Joscelyn Gardner, *Elizabeth ... calls herself Phibbah*, lithograph on frosted mylar, 2002 - 2003

slavery a part of the complex colonial matrix through which we come to “see” faces for these women?

It is through the absence of the face — the most crucial seat of identity in the tradition of Western portraiture — that Gardner turns the portrait on its head. It can no longer be read as a reliable and complete archive of knowledge about an historical individual. This flip also forces a consideration of the colonial debt of portraits and their stake in cultural capital. As an elite visual art practice invested in the class differentiation of “worthy sitters,” portraits depended upon the othered bodies of the absent or appendaged servant or slave body. Historical portraits of black sitters are extremely rare in the

West. Individuated portraits are even more so. Historical individual portraits of black or other colonized subjects, or of white servant classes, rarely carried the name of the sitter in the title. We inherit them today as the slave of so-and-so or the servant of Lady such-and-such. Thus, the title, position and achievements of the absent (yet named) white master or mistress became as much the subject of the portrait as the represented slave or servant. Since the black female body often functioned in portraiture (much as in figure painting) as the foil against which white female beauty was consolidated and celebrated, such black subjects were often literally and symbolically tangential within the image. They are present to serve, to be the “exotic” or “primitive,”

to point up the colonial power and imperial reach of the white sitter they helped to elevate.<sup>3</sup> Within this historical context to devote portraits solely to black female subjects, to deliberately reference slavery, to name them and to individuate them is a postcolonial turn indeed.

The references to slavery that Gardner’s portraits incorporate are precise and often difficult to look at. Gardner embeds the oppressive implements and weapons of slave torture directly into the beautiful and intricate hairstyles adorning her black female slaves. The beauty of the hair is disrupted in a disturbing gesture that again points up the race of the faceless women and their oppression within a colonial institution. We are reminded of

the physical violations that threatened the integrity and safety of body and culture. At the same time, the embedding does not "mess up" the hair — it is seamlessly and securely a part of the whole. One can speculate about how the rituals and practice of black hair were in part formed and hybridized through slavery and how assimilationist strategies were often thwarted through resistance of and on the body. Slavery, amongst its other evils, attempted to break the ability of black people to care for black bodies.<sup>4</sup> In the process, traditions, knowledge and rituals were lost, but new ones were formed.

For me, Gardner's lithographs remember the experience of black women doing each other's hair. As a young child, that experience was deeply comforting — sitting on the floor, between your mother's legs, while she combed out your (often unruly) hair and applied (at times, not too gently) healthy dabs of Dax or TCB. The smell of the products, the tug of your hair as it was formed into plats, the smell of breakfast (since this was surely a morning ritual), the pain in my neck as I squirmed to glimpse the cartoon on the television, the yank of the head and pain in my scalp as my mother compelled me back into place — all this is the joy of black female hair.

I also vividly recall the pain of not having my mother do my hair. When she was in the hospital my dad, unable to do it himself, enlisted the help of our maternal grandmother and alternatively, the Jamaican woman across the street. In both cases my sister and I thought it quite disastrous since the style (shape, positioning of plats and parts) was not our favourite or the parts were crooked. In the context of white suburban Canada, hair was for us a critical and often traumatic site of our

racial difference that the prying questions from white kids ("Why don't you need elastic to keep your braids in?") and actual physical assaults (braid yanking, with the purpose of "feeling" our difference?) helped to memorialize.

Today black-hair in the West is at a full-circle moment. With the advent of "natural," often chemical-free styles that embrace our original textures, there are more "natural-exclusive" hairdressers and more unisex salon experiences. Twists, short Afros, shaved heads, braids and dreads are common sights on black women, especially in urban diasporic centres in North America and Europe. Such shifts are celebrated in contemporary song by singers like Lauryn Hill and India Arie and contemporary books like *Nappy Hair*, which is written for children.<sup>5</sup> Although many of us can "do these styles" at home, the black hairdresser retains importance as a vibrant cultural and racial site of great community importance.<sup>6</sup>

Although Gardner's portraits are faceless, this move can be read as a unifying, solidarity-building gesture, rather than a homogenizing one. Here, the viewer has agency and the faces we may choose to insert say more about our own knowledge and/or ignorance of slavery and its attendant racial baggage than about the artist's own desires and consciousness. Do we see light or dark brown skins? Do we imagine African tribal markings or scars from abusive masters? Are they smiling or sad?

Gardner's inverted portraits can be read as an ironic move that, through naming and the specificity and intricacy of hairstyles, reclaims the individuality of those who were disenfranchised and made anonymous by slavery.

*Charmaine Nelson is assistant professor of art history in the department of art history and communication studies at McGill University. Her teaching and research areas include postcolonial/black feminism, critical theory, Canadian art, 19th century American and European art and the visual culture of slavery. She has published essays in a number of periodicals and books. She is co-editor of and a contributor to Racism Eh?: A Critical Interdisciplinary Anthology of Race and Racism in Canada.*

#### Notes:

1. See *Black, Bold and Beautiful* (1999), directed by Nadine Valcin, National Film Board of Canada.
2. Kobena Mercer, "Black Hair/ Style Politics," eds. Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha and Cornel West, *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures* (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1990), 249.
3. Deborah Willis and Carla Williams, *The Black Female Body: A Photographic History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 1.
4. See Ayana D. Byrd and Lori L. Tharps, *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2001).
5. Carolivia Herron, *Nappy Hair* (Toronto: Random House, Canada, 1997).
6. Hence, the success of films like *Barber Shop* (2002) starring Ice Cube, Eve and Cedric the Entertainer, soon to be followed by a sequel.

## This Is Not an Exhibition: The Future of the Reciprocal Readymade (the use-value of art)

apexart, New York  
17 March – 17 April 2004  
review by Carl Skelton



Installation view, *The Future of the Reciprocal Readymade*, 2004. Courtesy: apexart

1. The Future is what this exhibition would have been about, if it had been an exhibition. Why it wasn't one, and what it may become instead, I'll get to in a minute.
2. A Reciprocal Readymade is the obverse of a readymade: instead of making non-art objects be art, you use an art object for a non-art purpose. Duchamp's example was "Use a Rembrandt as an ironing board" ...
3. The use-value of art is an idea curator and theorist Stephen Wright has been

working on for a while. This idea, you've already figured out, is a tweak to — or special case of — Marx's economic concept of use-value, set in contrast to exchange-value.

On display in the gallery: videos, computers displaying websites, photos, printed matter, ephemera, a pot with some kind of grass growing in it and a slowly rotating wire-frame drawing of a modular block shape, with deep slots in one face. This is a very familiar format for contemporary installation, a genre in fact. Vera Frenkel, General Idea, Hans Haacke, Victor Burgin and thou-



Installation view, *The Future of the Reciprocal Readymade*, 2004. Courtesy: apexart

sands of other artists have worked in idioms built on a parody of the materials and language of the didactic displays proper to educational institutions such as museums, world's fairs and universities.

The work has all been produced by bona fide artists: the Critical Art Ensemble, xurban, Bureau d'Etudes, Grupo de Arte Callejero, the Yes Men, AAA corp., the Atlas Group. These are exactly the sorts of pseudo-institutional identities artists and collectives would construct for themselves in the service of an art practice that undertakes to critique non-pseudo-institutional narratives and practices within their cultures. The effectiveness of this kind of critical practice as public rhetoric is frustrating to some, embarrassing to others, and maybe just fine with a few. In Canada, the limits of such practices are negotiated on a day-to-day basis with funding agencies (the civil service) and museums (the civil service in consensus with the local gentry). In the United States, the civil service has been largely cut out of the process, which leaves the local gentry in the driver's seat. Individual artists and curators do what they think they can get away with.

But this show is different. It really is a display of archival materials, and it really does document the activities of people who really were doing what it looks like they were doing: participating in strike protests; printing political posters on stolen paper in a refurbished trailer; mapping the relationships between transnational corporate kingpins, institutions and

governments; proposing techniques for sabotaging GMO test plots. Some of the show simply displays artists' documentation of their non-art or not-exactly-art activities in France, Lebanon, Turkey, Argentina and so on.

I have rule about this kind of thing, which I derive from Aristotle's definition of art as mimesis: if it really is what it looks like, it's not art. Ergo, this work is by artists, but it's not art. This display is in a gallery, but it's not an (art) exhibition.

There are shades and nuances of grey in certain cases: xurban's 3D graphic of the block shape describes a tank of the type used to smuggle oil from Iraq to Turkey during the embargo: great big *things*, made to straddle the axles of trucks that were then loaded above with whatever decoy cargo was handy. The photographs, in particular, fit well within the category of "Art." On the other hand, the mere fact that AAA corp. included some screen-printing in its projects doesn't make their work printmaking, it's still printing. The fact that they (maybe) mastered a commercial technique at art school doesn't make their posters anything less (or higher) than the agitational propaganda fun they seem to intend.

In no case have any of the projects displayed demonstrated or performed Duchamp's idea of the reciprocal readymade. No works of art have been used for non-art purposes here *at all*. In fact, the Duchampian conceit bears on two meta-levels of the work: the artists themselves and the venue. Stephen Wright has

arranged for apexart to show works that were never art in the first place, by artists using their artist's skills in the service of not-art: political actions, distribution of information, dissemination of techniques and styles of dissent. The reciprocated readymade in question isn't Art, it's Art School: the ability to make things, to coordinate small groups, to come up with unintended uses for tools, to organize public events. Meanwhile, the show itself takes this into account: it is addressed to the actual audience apexart attracts — artists, arts professionals and art students from all over the world. And the message this not-exhibition sends is pretty clear — that there are people all over the world who went to art school, who are using the tools they were trained for to do good things, things that need doing.

In general, this refers not to the art object, but to the amalgam of institutions and practices that add up to "Art." It is this that Stephen Wright proposes to reciprocally readymake. The irony, of course, is that avant-gardes were political first, which would make this reciprocity some kind of a rebound.

Underlying this project is a distinction that you may accept or reject: a difference between political art and political action by artists, and an implied preference for the latter as the Real Thing.

The good news is that nobody's telling you to choose between the two — there are plenty of artists around, and there's always plenty of work left to do.

*Carl Skelton is a sculptor whose work has been exhibited internationally. He also writes for magazines such as dArt, C and Cabinet, and is the director of the Integrated Media Institute at Brooklyn Polytechnic.*

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YYZ acknowledges the support of its membership, The Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council, the Ontario Trillium Foundation and the City of Toronto through the Toronto Arts Council.

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**Scholarship Exhibition**  
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Image: Holly Greenberg, *Great Wight Hope*, Lincoln, 2003

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**scope and slant...**

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October 9: videos  
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November: Digital Dragon Meets Analog Unicorn

October: Event Horizon  
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Don Gill  
Ten Texts; Note Number 65 from Axis of Coincidence  
Robin Peck  
Sculpture, A Journey to the Circumference of the Earth  
Mitchell Weibe; curated by Roy Green  
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OPEN SPACE

1) Art (duh!); 2) Social Work; 3) A: Social Work, B: Art, 4) A: Social Work, B: Art, 5) A: Art, B: Social Work, C: Art (but be careful not to make a habit of it), D: Social Work (or, worse yet, possibly craft); 6) A: Social Work, B: Art (only counts if you did it in the 1970s, otherwise merely political); 7) A: Art (but watch out it doesn't devolve into identity politics), B: Social Work (Are you crazy? Get out of that kitchen — don't you know how much your time is worth?); 8) A: Art (if credit was shared by all participants then it is a community art project and thus social work), B: Social Work, C: Art; 9) A: Social Work (probably also identity politics, although possibly art if done in the 1980s), B: Art; 10) If your answer includes the words: "tax shelter," "interior decorating," "social cachet," "marketing," "corporate citizenship," or "investment" add a point to your total score.

## Art Or Social Work? A Handy Career Placement Quiz

by Janna Graham and Richard William Hill

“But is it art or social work?” — this is a question we’ve been asked recently on a number of occasions — from conference Q&As to conversations with funders. We thought we could clear things up with a helpful and informative quiz.

### QUIZ

- You are a wealthy businessman and have your likeness painted by a leading portraitist. You display your portrait prominently in your foyer and many compliments you receive on your superb taste bolster your standing in the community and sense of self-worth. Art or social work?
- You are an artist who works with teenagers, creating large-scale murals addressing their perspectives about life in a large urban centre. Many comment on the “important” work that you do to bolster their standing in the community and sense of self-worth. Art or social work?
- You are committed to the issue of homelessness in the city of New York and have invited other housing activists to create an information campaign. In which case, if any, could this be art?
  - You work for a grassroots organization.
  - You are working within an established art centre on the Lower East side in the early 1980s.
- You are a performance artist invited to create a work at a special event. In which case is this social work?
  - The event is an anti-globalisation march.
  - The event is a posh fundraiser for a contemporary art gallery that depends on you to provide the cultural cachet that will open those wallets.
- You have been commissioned to create the decorations for a social ritual in a community space. Under which circumstance should this be considered art?
  - It is the late middle ages and you are creating an altarpiece.
  - It is the present and you are an art collective commissioned to create spectacular papier-mâché figures for a cultural festival.
  - It is the present and you are an international art star commissioned to create spectacular papier-mâché figures for a cultural festival.
  - It is the nineteenth century and you are an Aboriginal craftsman creating ritual objects for community use.
- You are working with a prominent art museum and discover and reveal secrets about the sleazy business dealings of the museum’s patrons. Under which of the following circumstances is this art?
  - You are a disgruntled union member.
  - You are a disgruntled German artist invited to show at the museum.
- You have been invited to cook for people at a public gathering. Under which circumstances would this be social work?
  - You are a prominent international artist cooking a non-Western cuisine at a gallery opening.
  - You are a prominent international artist cooking at a soup kitchen.
- You have purchased a decorated serving vessel. In which case is this object art?
  - It was created by a group of un-credited women who assisted an important international feminist artist in creating an installation.
  - It was created by an Aboriginal community group as a gift for a local elder.
  - The vessel is a krater used to mix wine and water in ancient Greek drinking parties (aka symposia).
- Your work is often intensely autobiographical. In which case is it art?
  - You are a gay artist and your work sometimes refers to your sexuality, your childhood and your relationship with your long-time partner.
  - It is the early 20th century and you are the most famous artist in the world. You constantly paint self-portraits and erotically charged images of your mistresses.
- Fill in the blank: The purpose of art is \_\_\_\_\_.

Answers on page 51. Add your total number of correct answers (one point per correct answer) to discover what your score might mean for your future:

- 19 – 20: High level corporate art consultant  
 16 – 18: Curator specializing in single artist end of career blockbuster retrospectives  
 12 – 15: Curator of mid-size regional art exhibitions  
 8 – 11: Gallery educator aspiring to be a curator specializing in single artist end of career blockbuster retrospectives  
 4 – 7: Co-ordinator of High school art shows at the local shopping mall  
 0 – 3: Time to do that Master’s of Social Work



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**Dean Smale**

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**Kim Tae-Huk**

Oct 21 - Nov 20  
**Ludmila Armata**

Nov 25 - Dec 23  
**Barbara Robertson & Julie Voyce**

Upcoming Submission Deadline:  
 September 1



## Call for Expression of Interest Ontario Science Centre – Toronto, Canada

The Ontario Science Centre is seeking expressions of interest from artists whose work reflects a blending of the Arts and Sciences.

The Ontario Science Centre invites artists to submit expressions of interest for works to be commissioned for *Grand Central*, a new space under development as part of our *Agents of Change* renewal initiative. Serving as the inspirational start and end point of every Science Centre visit, this majestic hall will reflect the elemental foundations of science: Earth, Air, Fire and Water.

The selected installations will fuse art, science and technology in innovative ways to create a memorable experience for our visitors. Artists working in all media will be considered.

**Expressions of Interest must be postmarked no later than October 27th, 2004.**

Expressions should consist of a brief biography (up to six typed pages), up to eight 35 mm slides or a CD with eight jpeg images of relevant work. A written description of each past project should be supplied. A letter expressing the reason for your interest in this project should be included along with your contact address, telephone number, fax number and e-mail address.

*Expressions should be mailed to: The Collective, c/o Elgin Cleckley - Design Coordinator  
Ontario Science Centre, 770 Don Mills Road, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M3C 1T3*

*We thank you for your expression of interest, but regret that only short-listed artists will be invited to submit a proposal. Expressions will absolutely NOT be returned but will form an archive for possible future projects.*



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