

Volume 29 Number 4 \$5.50

ART MEDIA POLITICS

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FUSE

MAGAZINE

Diana Sherlock
grapples with a clash
of values

Regent Park Focus
reflects on the summer

Vicky Moufawad-Paul
delves into self-
representation with
Ruby Said





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Bill Burns, *Orange Work Gloves*, from the series *Safety Gear for Small Animals*, 1994-2004

Safety Gear for Small Animals, Bill Burns, Director

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Massimo Guerrera: Darboral (and the maintenance of a practice field)

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SHERWOOD VILLAGE GALLERY

David Hoffos: Still Life with Rotting Fruit

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AUGUST 11 TO NOVEMBER 5, 2006

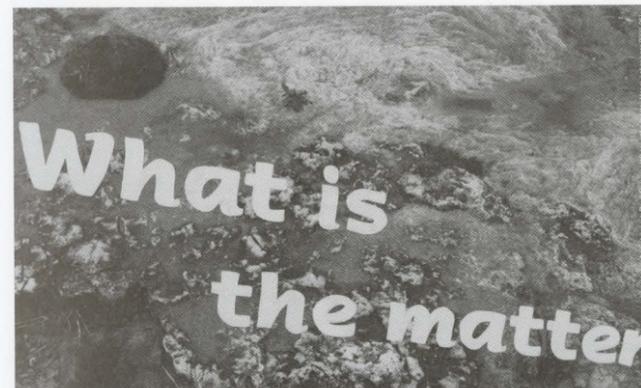
Stephen Andrews: a small part of something larger

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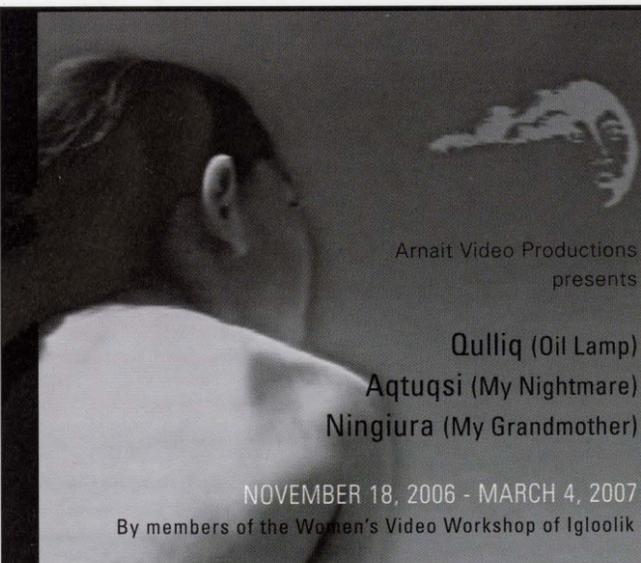
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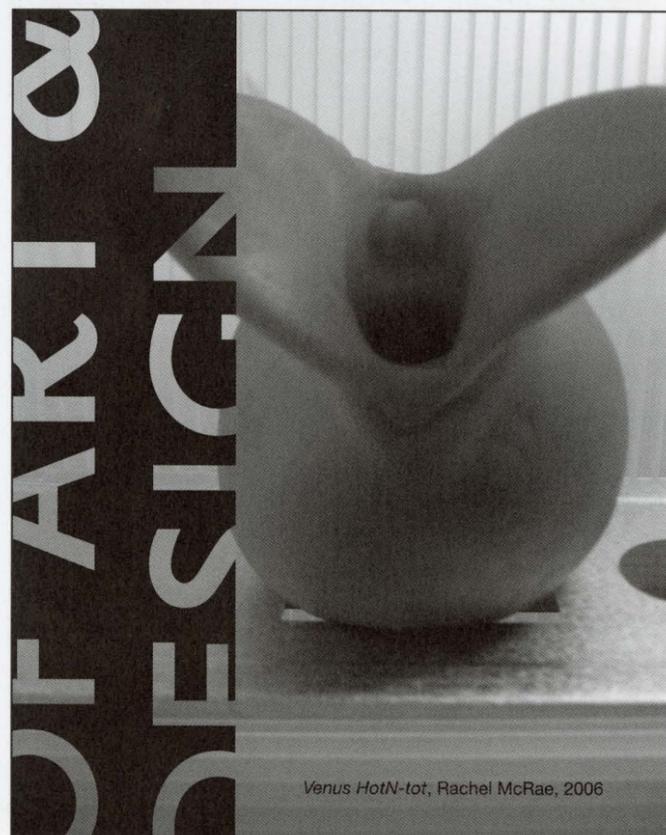
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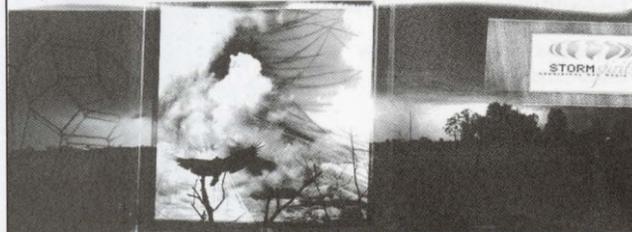
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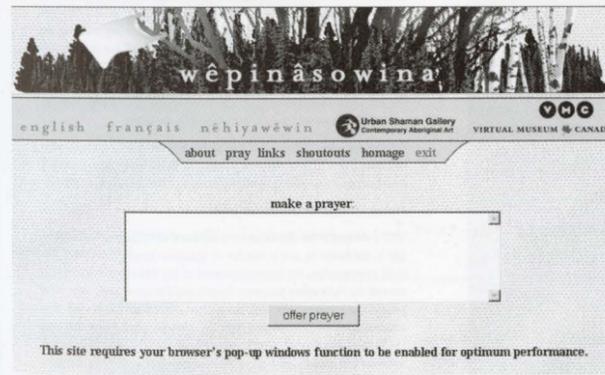
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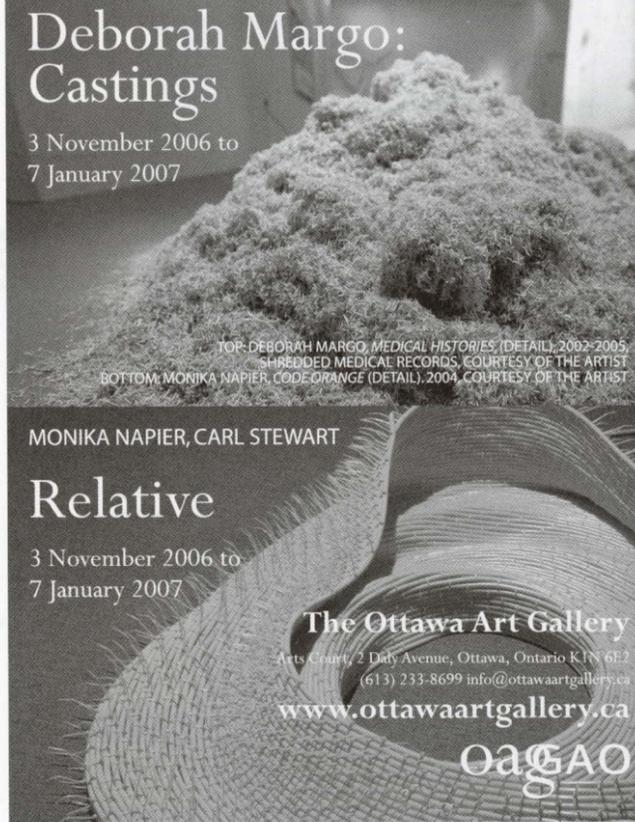
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 Cheryl L'Hirondelle

"The idea for this offering began in early 2001 when I was first introduced to some discourse regarding the interactive capabilities of online databases - specifically the user's ability to choose their own narrative path...I had been thinking about how I would describe cyberspace to an old person/elder - what element(s) would one say it was derived from and in what elemental domain does it exist? and importantly, does the sun shine, waters flow, grass grow and wind blow there?"

Cheryl L'Hirondelle (aka Waynohtêw, Cheryl Koprek) is an Alberta born but currently a Vancouver based, halfbreed (Metis/Cree-non status/treaty, French, German, Polish) multi/interdisciplinary artist. Since the early 80's she has created, performed, collaborated and presented work in a variety of artistic disciplines.



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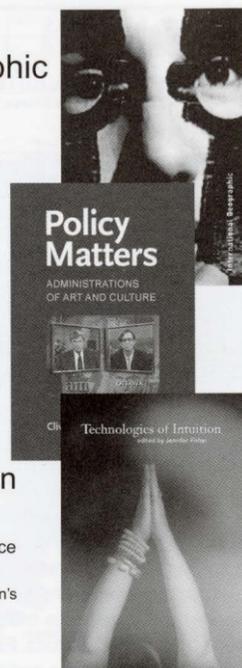
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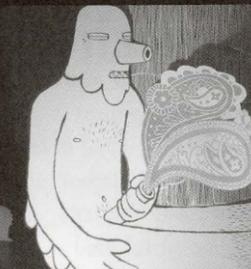
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FUSE

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Volume 29 Number 4 October 2006

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Mobilizing Our Interests

"And the devil came here yesterday. Yesterday the devil came here. Right here." (crosses himself) "And it smells of sulfur still today." Thus spoke Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez in the opening remarks of his address to the United Nations this past September. Calling on the UN to mobilize against American aggression on the people of Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, Afghanistan and to acknowledge the danger of American threats against Venezuela and Iran, Chavez identified the President of the United States as the spokesman for world global domination, a very dangerous man.

Our own dangerous man, Stephen Harper, used his first speech to the UN to justify Canada's increasing intervention in Afghanistan — a country Canada will take the lead in destroying and then rebuilding. By Chavez' definition, Stephen Harper is also a devil, but identifying him as such does not let Canadians off the hook. Canada has been complicit in us-lead wars since long before our current

government came to power, due in no small part to our role in weapons development, production and trading.

This issue of Fuse examines the question of mobilization on many fronts. How do we respond to our circumstances in ways that are empowering and challenging to dominant structures? How do we create new opportunities for self-representation that contest established and institutional perspectives in ways that are creative and proactive?

These questions are confronted head-on in our two columns. In *An Economy of Censorship*, independent writer and curator Diana Sherlock interrogates the censoring of the +15 window gallery at Calgary's EPCOR CENTRE and the ensuing community responses. Analyzing the tensions between autonomous programming, corporate values and public space, Sherlock considers the power relations within large arts conglomerates. In our second column, curator and scholar Rajdeep Singh Gill reconceptu-

alizes curation, refusing the dominant paradigms of western art history to introduce a new model that locates creativity as the world's commons. By offering a planetary theorization of cultural production, Gill challenges what he calls the art world-academia industrial complex.

The impetus for the theme of mobilization comes from the incredible response, analysis and social commentary that emerged from artistic and activist communities in Lebanon in resistance to the brutality of Israel's extensive air strikes on Lebanese civilians during July and August. As artist Jamelie Hassan notes in this issue's shortFuse, "The days of assault on Lebanon saw a constant delivery of images, strategic information, analysis and reflection directly from Lebanon through personal e-mails, blogs, artist and cultural organization websites, independent journalists and online media." This was supported by the political work of artists across Canada who organized direct actions, fundraising

exhibitions and communication trees for disseminating information.

The urge to define our experiences, to create and consider both the possibilities and the actualities of our communities, is exemplified in this issue's artist project *Chronicles of a Summer Media Arts Program* by Regent Park Focus. Through the media arts program, young people in the Regent Park community learn video making, music production and editing skills while documenting and dramatizing their lives and perspectives. They also have a lot of fun, as the images on pages 22–25 demonstrate.

All of these acts of resistance and creation work to undo those processes that normalize repression. In this issue's feature, video artist Vicky Moufawad-Paul interviews Ruby Said, a founding member of the Balata Film Collective in Palestine's Balata refugee camp. Said considers how the collective is working to document their experiences of living under military occupation while also representing the complexity and beauty of everyday life. The videos made by the collective offer powerful moments of self-representation, while their screenings temporarily create a decolonized territory that defies capitalist and colonial systems of distribution.

Artworks can provide powerful counter-hegemonic perspectives, offering alternative visions for conceiving of the world and outing implicit tensions. This issue's focus on community action is nothing new to Fuse, yet there is a new sense of urgency. As North America comes to increasingly resemble a regime that constitutional lawyer Rocco Galati — who is defending two of the "Toronto 17" arrested on secret terrorism charges this summer — describes as both fascist and dictatorial, the impetus to mobilize our communities is all the more critical.

Izida Zorde



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An Economy of Censorship

by Diana Sherlock

Last January the EPCOR CENTRE for the Performing Arts management, in response to approximately 12 public complaints, changed the viewing context of five visual art exhibitions in the +15 display windows by erecting a 6' by 48' wall down the length of the +15 pedestrian corridor. Signs warning, "viewer discretion is advised" were posted on each end of the wall.

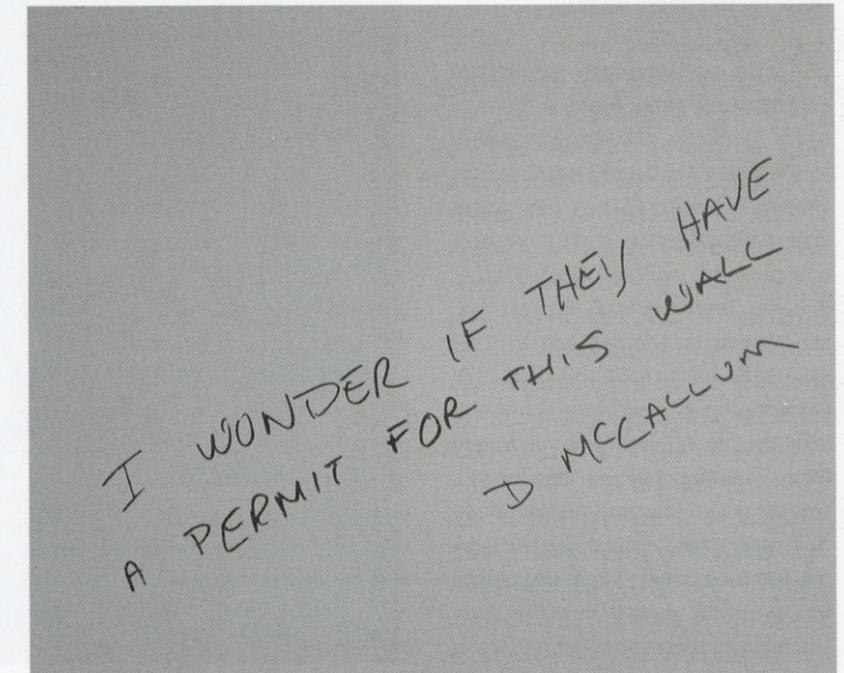
The +15 corridor within the arts centre is peppered with commercial display windows and is part of a network of indoor pedestrian walkways 15 feet above street level that links private businesses and public services within the downtown core. People choose to enter these spaces en route to specific destinations and access is restricted outside business hours. On behalf of the City of Calgary, the EPCOR CENTRE maintains, manages and surveils the section of the +15 that runs through its building. Although the +15 is managed as if it were a city street, EPCOR CENTRE determines what activities can or cannot take place in this space. This relationship projects private corporate values into the public sphere so that they are understood to be normative civic values.

Commercial and artist-run galleries began exhibiting work in the +15 windows in 1990 as adjunct programmers within the new Calgary Centre for the Performing

Arts, which housed several of the major theatre companies and the Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra. The goal of the +15 window initiative was to develop heightened awareness of Calgary visual arts organizations and practices in the city by programming high-traffic public spaces within Calgary's burgeoning downtown cultural district. The +15 windows are now programmed exclusively by small-budget, non-profit organizations including the artist-run centres TRUCK, Stride and The New Gallery, the Marion Nicoll Student Gallery and an artist's studio collective,

Untitled Artists' Society. Bubonic Tourist, who programmed the recently censored windows in collaboration with the galleries for their annual Mutton Busting performance and visual art festival, is EPCOR CENTRE for the Performing Arts' newest resident theatre company.

These spaces almost exclusively program emerging artists selected autonomously under each organization's programming mandate to show contemporary art and address critical issues. This censorship incident highlights conflicting values among



Graffiti on the wall erected by EPCOR CENTRE to create "choice" for viewers using the passageway.

the Centre's constituents and audiences. On one hand the Centre markets diverse, critically engaged, experimental work that represents what is going on in contemporary arts communities, but on the other, the space is considered a "public space" in which critical content is not always easily understood. Other +15 Window projects that have tread this line have also been compromised in the past; Jane Lee's *Hair Pie* (2001) was screened by the Centre to provide a restricted adult view of the sculpture and Dallas Seitz and Jeff Bray's installation *Punish* (1997) was left unobstructed but caused a media stir that threatened Stride's funding. The +15 windows are anomalies within the Centre where "art-works" are primarily promotional — a figurative mural depicting arts and cultural activities running the length of another section of the +15, or photographs of theatre or musical events — with a few modernist metal sculptures plunked in the corners. +15 programs, while generally quite conservative in their own right, promote a critical context not well understood within the corporate value structure of the city or this arts conglomerate.

During the exhibition's run, people gathered at a large public forum at the EPCOR CENTRE TO DISCUSS THE CURRENT CLASH OF VALUES. Moderated by CJSW's Arts Link radio announcer Jennifer Conway, participants Stride Gallery Director Anthea Black, TRUCK programming assistant Keith Murray, Bubonic Tourist Artistic Director Eric Moschopedis, the president and CEO of the EPCOR CENTRE for the Performing Arts Colin Jackson and members of the public outlined the impetuous process that led to the construction of the wall and the subsequent community and media fallout. Newspaper coverage and public commentary had been collected and added to the wall during the weeks prior to the forum and many of these issues became topics



Megan Hepburn, *Terminal Modern*, 2006. Courtesy: Stride Gallery.

for discussion. The forum queried whose standards would be used to determine appropriate use of these public spaces and how this would be known and monitored. Whose voice would be allowed visibility and by whom? Can good policy be based on the concerns of a few, and, if so, which few? What constitutes public space and what is the public's responsibility for being aware of the ideological position of spaces they enter? What role does the economy and political climate play in determining which images may be circulated? What responsibilities do we all have when we choose to interact in the public realm and what are the risks associated with this freedom?

The two windows in question presented

works by Vancouver artist Megan Hepburn and Brooklyn artist Edie Fake. Hepburn's realistic paintings from her series *Terminal Modern* depict dead or dying wild and domesticated animals within domestic spaces. They are a contemporary take on the seventeenth-century vanitas paintings that speak eloquently about man's mortality and fragility as it is revealed to us through our abuses of power, ideological blindness and violence.

In contrast to Hepburn's dark moralistic narratives, Fake's *Gaylord Phoenix in the Flower Temple* humorously imagines a fantastic and playful scenario of queer love and safe sex. The diorama uses commercial display conventions in which silkscreened paper cutout figures are

inserted amongst brightly coloured crafty flower cutouts. Theatrically lit decorative paisley patterns spew from one figure's cartoon genitalia, while another figure playfully ducks behind a hedge of flowers. Part of a larger series of works presented this year at the annual Mutton Busting Performance and Visual Art Festival called the *Department of Soft Architecture*, Fake's work contributed to what Moschopedis described as "creating a discourse about queer culture in Alberta, where we think it is largely unsupported and almost invisible in some respects."

Although the complaints were directed at Fake and Hepburn's windows, artists exhibiting in the other three windows — *Are You Scared?* by Geneviève Castrée, Kit Malo's drawing installation and Mikail Miller's *Don't Look Down* — were equally affected by the daunting structure and the controversy, but not well informed about

the Centre's decision-making process. Disturbingly, TRUCK Gallery and the artist showing in the Marion Nicoll were not even contacted by the Centre until after the wall was constructed. Bubonic Tourist maintained that EPCOR CENTRE'S management refused to explicitly state what was objectionable about the content of the work during their discussions.

At the forum, Jackson refuted any claims that EPCOR CENTRE had censored the work, using a legal definition to argue that what had taken place could not be considered censorship since it didn't "prohibit the publication, distribution or production of material deemed objectionable as obscene, indecent, or immoral." Moschopedis charged the Centre with "blocking" the work and suggested that they had, in fact, issued a written directive to the galleries to "replace [the work] with something else." Jackson suggested that

this was a miscommunication and reiterated "I left the request with the people at the EPCOR CENTRE to create choice...it was never that the work be altered or bowdlerized or removed. The end result was that we, EPCOR CENTRE, put up this wall or, as I prefer to call it, a 'choice machine.' We don't think what we're doing is 'blocking' it. You can see it; it's there to be seen." One member of the audience asked Jackson "whether or not it's doing a disservice to the community in your opinion to make those choices for people instead of letting people make those choices for themselves." Some would interpret Jackson's argument as a sly attempt to skirt the issue of censorship under the "letter of the law" and to use the rhetoric of choice and dialogue to, in fact, justify the unauthorized recontextualization of these artworks.

This case demonstrates a deliberate forsaking of the artist's choice (voice) to satisfy the moral leanings of a few members of the public. "When the artist's intent is to provide an experience for the audience and that experience is changed due to [a change in context], from our perspective," Moschopedis said, "that is censorship. It's true, you can still see the work, but you can't see the work the way the artist intended it." Visual arts programmer Renato Vitic stressed how this type of intervention impinges upon the artist's moral rights and effectively destroys the work; "When an institution applies its administrative authority in the form of a wall, in the form of a didactic panel that serves to apologize for a work, or contextualize a work, it interferes directly. The work is changed by the construction of a wall because, let's face it, walls can be powerful symbols and symbols of administered authority that can refer to a long history of certain ways of thinking. I would argue that you've actually eradi-



Edie Fake, *Gaylord Phoenix in the Flower Temple*, detail, 2006. Courtesy: Truck Gallery.

cated the work, and now the only thing that exists is this dialogue. The work is meaningless now — we haven't even discussed the work. Now all we have left is the wall and the administrative authority that was applied." Artist Grant Poier also suggested, "any artist that's working in a public context and who is wanting to create debate has to expect these things to happen, and their work maybe needs to be flexible enough to roll with the development." Unfortunately the lack of communication made any responsive, critical maneuver almost impossible and exacerbated an already inflammatory situation in which subsequent public declarations of community dialogue and cooperation rang hollow.

All censorship cases are disturbing for their abuse of power, but the heavy-handed way in which the EPCOR CENTRE'S management chose to wield their institutional authority has been interpreted by many as a sign of increasing corporate hegemony within Calgary's cultural community. Economic conservatism in the late 80s and early 90s reduced public money for culture and social services and encouraged a boom in public/private partnerships that continues today. There has been increasing economic and political pressure for non-profit arts groups to work within mega-structures, often with corporate underwriters. EPCOR, an Edmonton-based power and water utilities company, has been the Centre's corporate sponsor since 2001. The subsequent name change from the Calgary Centre for the Performing Arts to the EPCOR CENTRE signaled a broader philosophical shift from diverse civic values to more narrowly defined values driven by corporate image and the need to make money.

In a boomtown where prime arts space is limited and expensive, there are undoubt-



Kit Malo, *Our Eyes are Constantly Deceiving Us*, 2006. Courtesy: Untitled Art Society.

edly some economic benefits in organizing diverse arts groups into larger organizational structures. But should we be more concerned about the co-optation that can occur within these models? How much power do smaller organizations have within these conglomerates to protect their autonomous critical mandates in the face of larger agendas? How will these issues contribute to future overt or self-censorship cases within the EPCOR CENTRE for the Performing Arts and other shared facilities in Calgary? Without a serious reevaluation of this trend towards conglomerate arts models like the EPCOR CENTRE, we risk what American video artist Tony Conrad explains as a "convergence with those subject-positions which are defined and shaped by the ever widening currents of corporate information (power) and promotion (marketing)."¹

This incident of censorship offers us a much needed opportunity to evaluate the scope of EPCOR CENTRE'S influence on autonomous artistic programmers within its facility and the particular institutional roles these organizations have assumed within this arts conglomerate. EPCOR CENTRE administers an institutional infrastructure in which arts groups share facility, marketing and operating resources to implement their individual programs. It is assumed that this is an arm's-length relationship that does not affect programming decisions, but each resident satisfies a niche market within the Centre's economy that generates a certain amount of revenue.

The +15 window spaces and Bubonic Tourist satisfy an important institutional role for the Centre by providing "trans-disciplinary" experimental performative and

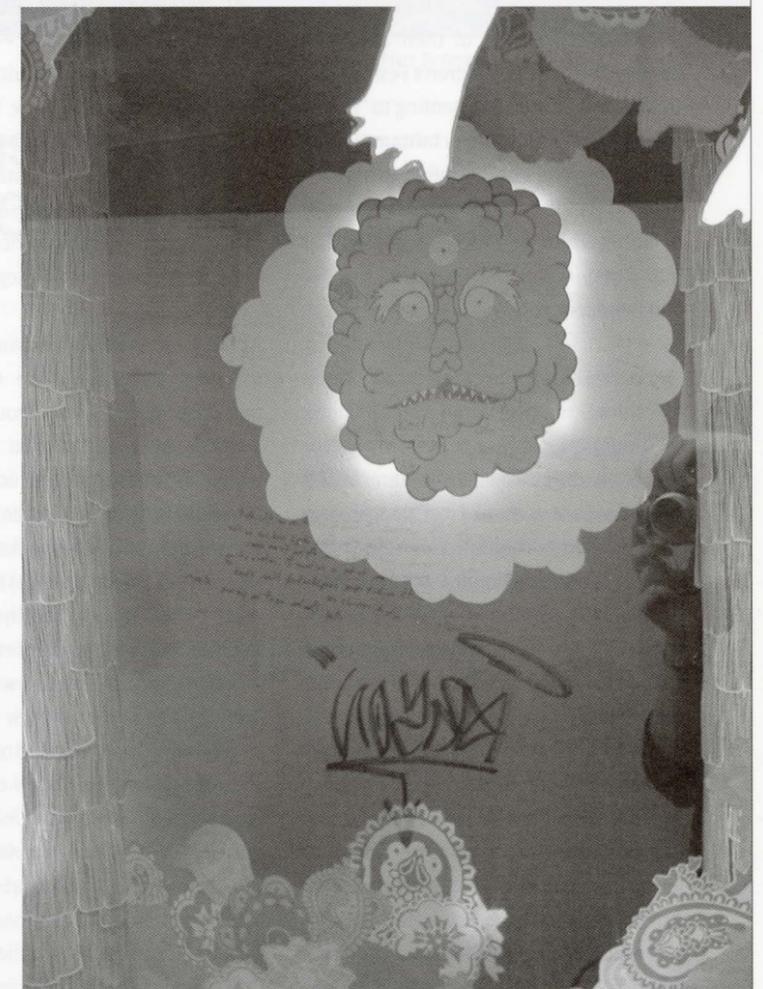
visual art projects for emerging artists to the Centre's program. Their content effectively widens the Centre's audience demographic beyond the now old guard of experimental theatre One Yellow Rabbit, and more traditional organizations such as Theatre Calgary, Alberta Theatre Projects or the Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra. The +15 window spaces and Bubonic Tourist also bridge the performing and visual arts communities, which is politically, if not economically, advantageous to the Centre's adopted role as "a place of artistic coalescence" within Calgary's official downtown cultural district. Yet the Centre's recent action openly contradicts its mission statement to "push the boundaries of contemporary art making and learning, creating the conditions for creative collisions and artistic risks that will lead Canadian art into unexplored territory."

There is also a pronounced economic hierarchy among the Centre's constituents that contributes to conflicting pressures. Bubonic Tourist and the +15 galleries provide programs for free or very low cost, which addresses EPCOR CENTRE'S mission to "provide inclusive, affordable arts experiences for all." So they are not major economic contributors to the theatre and concert hall revenues on which the Centre relies. In fact, they are often perceived as being supported by the Centre, as opposed to providing valuable programs to the Centre. There is a distasteful demand for gratitude implied here. One could even argue that the no rent/low rent status of these organizations conditioned the Centre's self-described "overreaction" to Fake and Hepburn's works. In other words, they were more easily targeted because they are economically and politically vulnerable, and if they were to leave the Centre, it would suffer no appreciable economic loss. There definitely does seem

to be some sort of double standard at work given that the +15 Window programmers were targeted when other, more lucrative organizations (One Yellow Rabbit) that also had complaints levied at them about recent advertisements that included masked naked figures, were not.

In exchange for subsidized operating costs and sustainable professional space, the Centre quietly expects its residents to buy into a particular rhetoric of diversity that is ironically, very safe, homogeneous and marketable to conservative arts consumers. This is particularly true of the art in EPCOR

CENTRE'S public spaces. As recently reiterated by the Centre's Executive Director and CEO Colin Jackson, autonomous programming decisions will be respected by the Centre but "the only [unwritten] restriction is that the programmers keep in mind that it's a public street, that it is open to anybody at any time. It's not a place where people make a choice to come into; they are passing through it on their way to somewhere else." Here Jackson implies, viewers of the works in these spaces must choose to be challenged, and since many don't, the windows should not critically engage their audiences, but rather reflect the status quo.



Edie Fake, *Gaylord Phoenix in the Flower Temple*, detail, 2006. Courtesy: Truck Gallery

In a recent email to the +15 programmers, Jackson outlined the expectation “that curators keep in mind that programming be ‘family friendly’.” What actually constitutes “family-friendly” programming remains precisely the sticking point. “Family-friendly” programming has a familiar ring to any of us who experienced the “community standards” debates of the 1990s. Indeed “community standards” echoed loudly during most of those years and were almost always tied to funding. Here “family-friendly” neatly repackages the same old moral debates to reflect corporate standards of the new millennium. This descriptor clearly serves the interests of some of EPCOR CENTRE’S partners who market “community” and traditional family values as part of their image — notably The Calgary Children’s Festival and EPCOR. But for others, consenting to “family friendly” programming is tantamount to committing one’s organization to a policy of self-censorship equal to building a wall in words which entrenches a consensual moral majority that levels critical content and heightens conservative ideals.

Throughout the forum, Jackson advocated for “choice” but here again, choice follows a corporate logic and is defined in economic terms. He stated, “We are saying that there are a number of people who wish to have the choice to view it [the windows] or not, that it’s not a private gallery and that it is a public space.” Ironically, we seem to have less choice in a public space than in a private space, but this of course means more choice for the few who can afford to enter or participate in a private economy. If you can pay, you can play seems to be the message. The One Yellow Rabbit poster — an ad selling product using the body, but not critically commenting about the body or sexuality — was a timely example of how images are allowed to circulate freely in the service of

capitalism and power, but not in the service of criticality. In citing two letters of support, Anthea Black suggests “many other instances where, in the public sphere, [the authors] see images or confront realities that are much more violent or sexual or disturbing than what they’ve seen in the windows” and questioned why “there’s even less dialogue around those kinds of instances than there is around these windows.” Shock tactics are commonly used advertising strategies — the SPCA, for example, uses images of recently euthanized animals to evoke empathy and spur animal adoptions, or Jackson characterized Calvin Klein ads as “inappropriate and reprehensible” but argued that “we can’t edit those” even though they exist in the public sphere — but similar imagery used to provoke critical debate is often dealt a silencing blow. This is a difficult conundrum for artists who, as Black posits, see the “fundamental role of the artist in our culture to raise these issues [queer sexuality and violence]” in public, particularly in the face of hegemony.

Although its critical effectiveness is often assumed, visual art in the +15 windows and other public spaces around the EPCOR CENTRE is often reduced to an aesthetic backdrop and supported, not because of its critical content, but rather for its design, beauty and cool cachet. Jackson has stated that the public “encounter[s] art as a collateral benefit” of being in the CENTRE, and that the CENTRE is “not a destination” for visual art. Indeed the +15 windows often seem collateral to even their host gallery’s program — programmed offsite, on a shoestring budget with few opportunities for discussion. Even for an informed audience, the +15 Windows have become far too invisible a site for critical dialogue and often blend into the commercial banality of their surroundings. Yet the value of the +15 windows is that they provide a site to

participate in Habermas’ idea of the public sphere; a site in which values constantly form, shift and dissolve through social interaction and public dialogue.

Fake and Hepburn’s works were not suitable “window dressing,” and it was the works’ critical potential that drew them to “the public’s” attention. This is an important cue to the +15 programmers as to how they could more effectively use these sites. Big players can occupy even small spaces and the collaborative programming model used during the Mutton Busting Festival challenges the simple formula of budget plus square footage equals community support and impact. Perhaps any new +15 programming mandate and additional didactics should more directly address some of the issues at the site itself; it is a perfect location for projects about private/public space, the co-option of creativity and the corporatization of culture and criticality.

Postscript:

As this goes to press, Bubonic Tourist is closing its doors after a six-year run. This sudden development is partly due to the fact that Eric Moschopedis is going back to school, but it is also motivated by the company’s growing concern that their content was becoming commodified in a way that they never intended.

Note:

1. Tony Conrad. “Lessons for Localism from the Censorship Wars,” *The Squealer* (Fall 1991). www.experimentalv-center.org/history/people/ptext.php?id=17&page=1.

Diana Sherlock is a Calgary independent curator and visual arts writer.

Many thanks to Sandy Lam and Eric Moschopedis for transcribing the forum discussion from which these excerpts are taken and Anthea Black for her organizational support.



Fabiola Nabil Naguib, *Archives Re/Imagined*, No. 1 of 5 in Series 1, 2005. Courtesy: the artist.

Ethical Re/orientings and Re/memberings of Curatorial Practice

by Rajdeep Singh Gill

Curatorial work is a creative, daily practice for me; it is not merely centred around exhibitions, professionalized settings like artist-run centres, museums and galleries, or other contexts and terrains of the art world-academia industrial complex. Curation, as I theorize it, is the nurturing of and engagement with all forms of human and non-human creativity on the planet. To redefine curatorial practice as such means depthfully acknowledging and engaging with the creativity and culture-making of both human and non-human social actors, families, communities — in essence, *qudrat* and *ek ongkar*. I activate *qudrat* and *ek ongkar* as conceptual frameworks through connection

to my ancestral Sufi, Bhakti and Sikh traditions; similar philosophies are to be found in communities around the world, an example on Turtle Island being the profound philosophy-practice of “all my relations” within Aboriginal and Native American epistemologies.

This reconceptualization of curation is based on non-humancentrically locating creativity as the world’s commons. Creativity, both human and non-human, is present everywhere, challenging the art world and its discursive arenas to open up to its vitality, criticality and sacredness; no one can hoard creativity, nor can

it be contained. This planetary theorization of creative processes and cultural production is not based on dichotomies of self/other or margin/periphery; it does not provide dominant discourses defining power, nor does it support the dehumanizing and disempowering centrism of colonial paradigms.

To re/member and re/orient curatorial practice towards planetary creativity involves fundamentally yoking curatorial practice to ethics. It necessitates going beyond curatorial inventiveness within both Northern and Southern professionalized contexts in which debates around

hybridity, identity and postcoloniality may be too-easily utilized to relinquish personal and/or institutional responsibility. Curatorial practice embedded in accountable relationship building calls for a commitment and vision far beyond the satisfaction of funding rationales, negotiation of bureaucratic and corporate norms, management of public profile and relations, creation of exhibition and biennale spectacles, fetishization of the quick inventiveness of many art world curatorial strategies, etc.

Ethical flows and exchanges have enormous possibilities and rewards, personal, communal and planetary. However, they do not aim to “match” the sanctioned “solidity,” the glamour and the “measurable results” of being responsive and compliant to the narrow dictates of dominant social, cultural and economic capital. All too often, curatorial practices and cultural production outside of these conjunctions are disappeared and/or constructed as “unworthy,” “unsophisticated,” etc., or domesticated along hegemonic whims, necessities and agendas, propagating disposability of subaltern/ized creative endeavors within art world nexuses.

Based on alternative theorizations of creativity, curation and cultural production co-developed with multimedia and interdisciplinary artist Fabiola Nabil Naguib, I locate many of the currently accepted professional, popular, “postmodern” and “postcolonial” imaginings of cultural theory and practice as still deeply colonial and eurocentric. In fact, the general historical basis on which “post-structuralism,” “postmodernism,” “postcolonialism” along with many other aspects of dominant cultural theory are constructed remains extremely narrow. Within non-eurocentric and planetary bases, these cultural moments emerge as

Mute As Bottles

Both of “my” countries have deserted them

In one state
“a world away”
in the other
a neighbour

and what have we done?

While one of my two “home” countries
continues to contribute “aid”
to this occupying state
the other
receives approximately 66 cents
for every dollar the occupiers get from the U.S. alone

Although
it must be mentioned
that in the true spirit of globalization
the “developmental assistance” and “aid”
that go to this Apartheid state
come from nations and elites
all over the world

So then...
What does the occupying state get?
Trillions in the last thirty years!

And what do those that are occupied get?
While their people are being killed
one by one
and often dozens at a time
we are systematically fed twisted
and decontextualized images on the news...
as if they are all terrorists, fundamentalist crazies,
as if they have no rights to their own land, peace or justice

So, I ask you!
If your homes
your jobs
your education
your livelihood
yes and your lives
your family members
your homeland
and your freedoms
were taken from you...

Would you not fight back?
Would you not at least resist?

If generations of your family
were and still are
tortured
disappeared
forced to flee
killed on your streets
and in your homes...

Would you not retaliate?
Would you not at least defend yourself?

I ask these questions
as I sit here in one of my two “home” countries
typing on my lap top
sipping tea
in my comfortable apartment
where I hear no bombs or guns shooting off in the distance...
just a little traffic
a few planes
and the birds chirping

For today
I do not worry
that either of my already settler-colonial “home” countries
will be taken over by another occupying state
but I worry for our hearts
our spirits
desensitizing
as we sit complacent
“mute as bottles” *
doing little or nothing
to stop the insanity all over the world
while our governments fund it
turning blind eyes in the name of capital
and “we”
collectively
make this all possible

I will not hold my breath
for the day when either
of my country people unite and stand all together
against the war crimes
against the genocide
against the unbelievable injustice

but I will
continue to speak out, create, write and march for this...

no less disgusted, no less disheartened, no less ashamed!

Detail of no. 1 of 3 in Uninhabiting the Violence of Silencing Series
Fabiola Nabil Naguib, 2006, Wall installation; mixed media.
Courtesy: the artist.

For Peace, Palestine and the Palestinian people

* The phrase “mute as bottles” is taken from “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* by Audre Lorde (The Crossing Press, CA, 1984), p. 42.

tiny inscriptions inside and alongside innumerable alternate histories, legacies and theories. As Naguib states, “strategically and artificially ‘exorcizing’ or Eurocizing alternate legacies out of cognition and recognition deeply affects the validity and necessity of critical euro-discoursing and engagement.”¹ Aside from Euro-historical theories, plethoric worldviews and narratives exist and profoundly enrich how power, knowledge, history, memory and identity may be imagined, accessed, activated and inhabited.

A non-centric and non-humancentric way of thinking about critical thought and practice is powerfully articulated in Naguib’s *Ancestral River*, a discursive project first installed alongside the river Nile in the heart of a high traffic area of Cairo, Egypt in 2003. Naguib’s work connects with the river as a living entity; an active, cognizant site of knowledge, creativity, histories, memories and connection. The river is a profound witness on the planet supporting resistances to oppression and inhumanity along with having a healthy disregard for “the reified borders we call our homes.”² If we listen to “our ancestral rivers seas oceans brooks lakes and streams,” like numerous human and non-human communities have done and continue to do, we come to

realize the falsehood of violently policed familial, communal and national imaginaries and state boundaries, and the “inevitability of connection.”³

Cultural theory is certainly not limited to the Derridas or Foucaults or to human beings only. Naguib’s powerful call to traverse reified borders through *connective practice*⁴ is part of ethical engagement with rivers as cultural practitioners and theorists. Powerful social movements today continue to sprout out of such an engagement, an example being the Narmada Bachao Andolan in India. *Adivasi* (indigenous) and other communities are continuing to resist the damming of the Narmada that is supported by powerful regional, national and international elites. This resistance movement comes out of ancestral and lived, not largely instrumentalized or abstracted, understandings of environmental damage and human displacement, and continued connection to the creative power and wisdom of the river and the land.

Naguib’s *Ancestral River* was also published in *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* as a site-specific work. Within a mainstream visual arts framework, the piece is a “painting” with a “poem” as (accountable)

title, site-specific in consciously intervening and challenging other texts in *Yishu*. In enfolding these elements together, the work refuses to construe the visual and literary, or the idea of site, as separate; rather the work foregrounds them as part of creative practice at large. The “painting” and the “poem” are not really what I am naming them as; they are a whole, *Ancestral River*, a living entity breathing in and out of the pages of *Yishu*, and now this magazine; an ancestral presence and site that is a planetary installation inhabiting diverse spatio-temporalities.

Naguib thus disrupts how art historical and visual arts discourses discipline and codify notions of “painting,” “literature,” “installation,” etc. More widely speaking, how a particular “media” or “type” of art is imagined is well policed by these colonially invested discourses. For example, a photograph on a wall is never only that. It invokes all kinds of presences that are alive or become alive or transmuted through activation within diverse human and non-human cultural ecologies. Here I am not pointing to the reified and imperial “complexity” of “photoconceptualism” but to the social interplay, texture and life of any creative act and terrain. No person or community — including the “public,” subalt-



Fabiola Nabil Naguib, *Archival Egg*, No. 2 of 21 in Series II, *Hatching Memory* installation series, 2005. Courtesy: the artist.

ernized or "third world" artists and peoples — need to be "educated" into "cutting-edge" "contemporary" art making. The fundamental problem is with the vision and practices that inform art-world nexuses. I believe it is the responsibility of those who inhabit these privileged landscapes to challenge the power and authority vested in the distorted structures of the art world industrial complex and its hyperreal simulacrum of "criticality." This implies accountably engaging with the richness and vitality of creative sites and not violently erasing or making ghostly the powerful creativity that inhabits the planet at large.

My critical model foregrounds the most profound and vital forms of curation as taking place outside sanctified art worlds. Professionalized artworlds are certainly part of the larger creative landscape. At the same time, their role in the ecologies of curation remain negligent and mostly destructive as their fundamental task is not one of yoking ethical responsibility to curation but commodification and colonization.

Take the generalized ideas of postmodernity that inform the cultural industry. There is a perpetuated sense that there were grand narratives and visions of modernity that, since the mid-twentieth century, have come to be challenged, their contradictions more consciously realized and probed. This historical sketch is overwhelmingly eurocentric, based on giving centre stage to shifts in power/knowledge nexuses only once registered, acknowledged or grasped by colonial academies and other elite art and knowledge industries.

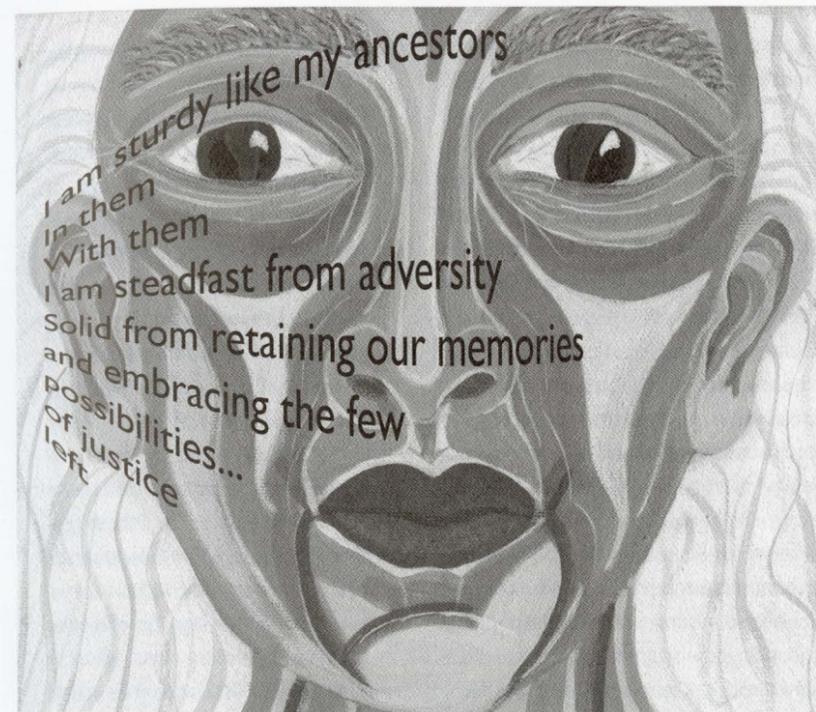
Numerous subalternized communities worldwide were, and are, aware that Modernity is about genocide. The disconnecting of peoples and communities from each other and all life is not about

humanism, civilization or democracy. "Postmodernism" and other eurocentric historicizations gain their centrality and critical flourish in many ways by erasing and minimizing alternate histories of knowing, becoming mutated versions of the so-called "Discovery" of the Americas. Jack Forbes in *Africans and Native Americans: The Language of Race and the Evolution of Red-Black Peoples* documents African presence, cooperation and exchange in the Americas before Columbus, and indigenous presence from Turtle Island and Abya-Yala in Africa and Europe before the so-called European "discovery" of the "new" world. Transnational and transcultural terrains of alternative social systems and manifold spatio-temporalities were and are being built and inhabited by African, indigenous and many other peoples in the Americas; not solely in reaction to the domination of European social systems that "pass" for the marked and unmarked "centre" of modernity, but in relation to their own philosophies, histories and practices.

To cast the critiques of eurocentric modernity primarily under the rubric of postmodernism is to keep intact the centrality and false authority of euro-settler-colonial paradigms. Postmodernity, along with other colonially invested cultural theorizations and practices, is unfortunately often tied to the distortion, denial and repression of philosophies, histories and critical agencies of innumerable peoples and communities on the planet. Postmodernism and dominant academic industrial complex "isms" are ingeniously heralded as a major shift in the understandings and nature of the world; they may more aptly be described as narratives forced upon or lead by the White Man, or the post-structuralist, critical White Man and all those needing or wanting entry to the Master's "decentred" House.⁵

Naguib has perceptively theorized eurocentric and colonial modernity as a project rooted in socialized disconnection;⁶ an example of the nature of eurocentric modernity being incisively understood and resisted is *adivasi* communities' response to British colonial power in India. The British first started making excursions into indigenous communities and territories in the name of trade and infrastructure. Many *adivasi* communities quickly realized that consenting to the coming of the road to their lands would enable the start of a more extensive process to undermine their communities, lands, philosophies and practices of being in the world. The *adivasi* rebellion against British colonial rule and complicit Indian elite thus began much before the so-called First War of Indian Independence in 1857 or the coming of Gandhi and Nehru to the national public stage. It emerged long before the "post-colonial" discourses of today.

The British colonial history of India highlights that globalization of capital is nothing new. The East India Company, a multinational corporation, colonized India. Similar corporations played, and continue to play, an instrumental role in colonizing many parts of the Americas, Asia and Africa, along with other places in the world. Part of resistances and resiliencies are global ethical narratives from "below." These planetary narratives include those of ancestral rivers, discussed earlier in relation to the diasporic indigenous articulations of Naguib's work as a Copt and *adivasi* movements. They are based on lived understandings and experiences of the violent ethic of capital and the coloniality of a social system committed to the alienation of ourselves from ourselves, our communities and the earth. These critiques connect with those of other indigenous communities, such as



Laguna Pueblo philosophical understandings of the impact of uranium mining on their land, eloquently articulated by Leslie Marmon Silko in "Fifth World: The Return of Ma ah shra true ee, the Giant Serpent."⁷

Having grown up in a household that inhabited Sikhism openly, my worldview and critical outlook has been deeply nourished by non-Eurocentric ethical discourses, including *Sufi* and *Bhakti* narratives. The writing of my truths to power in this essay, my curatorial practice, my connection to the earth, to justice, to the sacredness of all life, is supported by these socio-cultural philosophies and practices and they continue to give me great strength and insight. The root meaning of *Bhakti* is participation, ethical participation in socio-political life and in a particular historico-divine context. Sufism, a heterodox and mystical sect of Islam, with a strong cross-cultural, cross-class and

cross-religious base, offers powerful critiques of oppressive social systems, and alternative socio-cultural conceptions of power, self, divinity and justice.

My connection to *Bhakti* and Sufism as conceptual springboards, rather than mere sociological aspects of Sikhism or Islam or hybridized *adivasi* traditions, shares Dipesh Chakrabarty's deep critique of how agency and time figure in historical paradigms. As Chakrabarty eloquently argues, one needs to critique the "assumption running through European modern political thought and the social sciences...that the human is ontologically singular, that gods and spirits are in the end 'social facts', that the social somehow exists prior to them".⁸ In contrast, *Sufi* and *Bhakti* traditions allow ways of thinking about agency and subjecthood that escape the Eurocentric rendering of "modern" historical time/space as only singular and secular.

I am sturdy like my ancestors

A generation
Diasporic
Indigenous to another continent
Calling this
Colonized
Land
"My home"

Stolen from indigenous generations past
and Contemporary
I live here
On another's land
Not on my own

Hypocritical
Privileged
Indigenous
Erased

in both countries—both supposedly my home

In one of them
I am "privileged"
with staying alive for my silence
or at the very least out of prison
in the other
I am a potential "Enemy"
a "Radical"
a "Terrorist"
whether I speak
whether I do not

...striving to reconnect the pieces of my old selves....

I am sturdy like my ancestors
In them
With them
I am steadfast from adversity
Solid from retaining our memories

and embracing the few
possibilities...

of justice
left

As I walk in my
two "home" countries
I continue in the endeavour to restore my faith
that anything...
will ever be different

I am sturdy like my ancestors
Still here
and when I go
others will follow our tracks
like I follow
the shadows of my ancestors

I Am Sturdy
Like My Ancestors
Our Hearts
Our Spirits
Our Memories
Our Minds
Our Bodies...

Still Here

Detail of Sturdy Like My Ancestors, Fabiola Nabil Naguib,
2005, wall panel for larger installation: acrylic on canvas
with digital text overlay. Courtesy: the artist.

The role of various *Bhakti*, Sufi and Jain-Buddhist discourses as creative sites, engendering eco-ethical philosophies that enable social movements for justice, is highlighted in the activist work of UBING, Policy Research for Development Alternatives, in Bangladesh. As part of my transnational curatorial project, *Planetarity*, and co-founding of Creativity Commons⁹ with Naguib, I connected with Farida Akhtar and Farhad Mazhar of UBING. They are involved in *Nayakrishi Andolon*, or “new agricultural movement,” whose cultural and ethical bases are rooted in “local knowledge and discourses on social wisdom expressed in music, poetry, festivals, theatres...”¹⁰ These discourses, coming out of the saintly traditions of Bengal, are “strongly rooted in ecological visions and strong ethical foundation of social justice.”¹¹ One hundred and seventy thousand farming families participate in seed exchanges through decentralized community wealth centres in each village and household, successfully producing over two thousand varieties of rice, 40 varieties of chilis, etc.

Nayakrishi Andolon's work is deeply curatorial; the cultivation of the creative potential and power of seeds, the land and of human communities, based on connectedness and an ethic of reciprocity and sharing constitutes a powerful landscape of curation. Also, songs, music and poetry from the saintly traditions are not engaged as cultural commodities. They are honoured as local creative and philosophical sites, part of doing life with joy and critical reflection, that “constitute the eco-ethical foundation upon which movement for social change is strengthened and accelerated.”¹² To me, UBING's work underscores that the nurturing and honouring of eco-ethical creative narratives is deeply connected to self-determi-

nation, and contributes to flourishing of humanity and of the earth.

The philosophical frameworks I have outlined in this article thus far shed a different light on the edifice of codified “conceptual” art. In my view, the discourse of “conceptual art” as energized in the professionalized art world and the discipline of art history is a permutation of imperialism and eurocentricity. Which creative process and practice is not conceptual and intellectual? No social labour is devoid of the possibilities and activations of creativity, no art or creative process is devoid of intellectual and conceptual labour, and all life journeys are connected in some way to understanding, theorizing and negotiating social and creative worlds. Creativity is thus not to be largely imagined and accessed as a reified “conceptual” entity in the service of capital and its coloniality, as coded in hyper-real western avant-gardism and dominant narratives of modernity and postmodernity. Conceptual art is as old as the earth and has existed throughout human and non-human history; it certainly was not “discovered” by Marcel Duchamp or anyone else in the twentieth century. Duchamp may be seen by many to have rich and interesting things to say, but his legacy is not the only one; it is a tiny inscription of the planet, a microscopic drop in a billion oceans. There are innumerable ways of theorizing, thinking and being in the world and if we decolonize our imaginings and inhabitations of cultural production and curation, we open ourselves to enormous possibilities.

The following text, taken from Fabiola Nabil Naguib's multimedia image *Art and "The Everyday,"* (No. 1 of 5), *KissAss Panel and Postcard Series*, 2005, provides a courageous and sharp critique of art world nexuses:

Art and “The Every Day”

Whose right is it to deem something as Art and everything else as “merely” a creative project or craft, “traditional” versus “contemporary,” or “contemporary” vs. Traditional? A rhetorical question really because I do not believe in any right of way that encourages policing of any kind, by any people/s, over any others. I see the vast majority of institutions and those who are happily or unhappily entrenched in them as invested in elitist and sanctioned practices of creative/artistic exclusion and streaming. An effective system of erasure that allots a select few to be deemed as artists and relegates the rest of the enormous and diverse communities creating art, all over the world, as exercisers of creativity or creators of that which is creative, but not Art. The arrogance, greed and lack of vision that institutionalizes and promotes one model of creative process that supposedly leads to the creation of Art, or “high Art,” is elitist, but it is transparent:

artistic commodification 1. adj. art or artist as commodity; n. (esp. pl) the commodification of art; 2. to commodify one's art into the “cleverness” of the “avant-garde,” or within codified traditions; see traditional-“ized” or traditionally deemed art or “contemporary art;” 3. to dislocate your art to a point where it holds “meaning,” only by way of its collectability or the promotion of those that collect; see dealers, critics, curators, galleries, museums, scholars, elites; (also see) artworld 1. n. (esp.

pl) groupings of local and transnational elites participating in the perpetuation of an institutionalized and sanitized project; 2. to be selected to participate in institutionalized exclusion; being an elite member of a select/ed group to be deemed as, showcased as and perpetuated as the only Artists on a particular continent (any), in a particular time period or decade; (see) privileged elite; upwardly mobile; communally challenged; (also see) communal or community 1. adj. n. (esp. pl) anything of, used by, shared in or remembered by any or all members of a community or group; 2. anything relating to a connection to or acknowledgement of communities or belongings 3. behaving in a way that promotes the betterment of a community or peoples; (see) humanity n. sing. (esp. pl); inhabiting such and honouring the same in others; (see) creative possibilities; (see) endless...

Based on Naguib's and my experiences and theorizations, the basic structural and institutional function of the artworld may be described as the maintaining of elite intellectual and cultural projects to sanitize and commodify creativity, and the perpetuation of the disconnection of peoples and communities from their own creative power and potential. As part of decolonization, art institutions need to work towards uninhabiting their ab/use of codified and easily validated cultural capital and authority.

The foregrounding of my collaborations with Naguib is part of a decolonial ethic of acknowledging mutuality and reciprocity rather than denying it in conformity with colonial social practices and systems. This

coloniality of power defines narrow, Eurocentric ideas of “professionalism,” theorizing, writing, art production, curation, in which being accountable and depthfully naming and nurturing the co-creation of our journeys with our partners, colleagues, other human beings and the earth, is not encouraged. Naguib and I, also partners in life, cultivate our theorizations and collaborations through connecting to creativity as part of a larger living commons; creativity as an everyday human and non-human practice of survival, connection, ethics, knowledge and resistance. I believe creativity is a basic yet profound power and potential inherent in humanity and at a deeper level is the site of the uncolonizable.

I believe that as part of my decolonial journey, my participation, my agency, what I build, needs to connect across multiple spaces and reified borders. I view my personal, professional, academic and all other facets of life as deeply interrelated, and I work to inhabit an ethics that holds them together rather than atomizing them into separate or cognitively dissonant components. The overall vision and commitment of my curatorial practice is to participate in social movements that activate the ethical re/memberings of creative power and potential. For me, it is an integral part of my humanity to inhabit responsibility and creativity, and I wish to honor that in myself, along with honoring the humanity and sacredness of others, across borders, contexts, and what Naguib aptly terms, “socialized divides.”¹³

Notes:

1. Fabiola Nabil Naguib. *Transnational Art as Activism: Resisting Art as Commodity*, forthcoming.
2. Quote is from the poem-title of Naguib's installation, *Ancestral River*.
3. Ibid.
4. Connective practice is a philosophy-practice articulated by Naguib in detail in her upcoming publication, *Decolonizing Inhabitations of 'Interdisciplinarity': Re/Orienting 'Interdisciplinarity' as Connective Practice*.
5. The phrase, “the master's house” is from Audre Lorde's essay “The Master's Tools will Never Dismantle the Master's House” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde*, (Freedom: Crossing Press, 1984).
6. This theorization is developed by Fabiola Nabil Naguib in various essays, poems and art works in *Uninhabiting the Violence of Silencing: Activations of Creativity, Ethics and Resistance*, (Creativity Commons Press: Vancouver | Galiano, Coast Salish Territories, 2006).
7. *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit: Essays on Native American Life Today* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), pp.124–135.
8. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p.16.
9. Creativity Commons Collective and Press, website and public launch, forthcoming fall 2006/winter 2007.
10. www.ubinig.org
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. See “Re/membering: Uninhabiting the Violence of Silencing” in *Uninhabiting the Violence of Silencing: Activations of Creativity, Ethics and Resistance*, (Creativity Commons Press: Vancouver | Galiano, Coast Salish Territories, 2006).

I would like to thank Patrick Mahon, Jamelie Hassan and Ron Benner for inviting me and welcoming me in London, Ontario, where a version of this essay was first presented as a public talk at the University of Western Ontario in November 2005. I would also like to express my gratitude to the Coast Salish peoples whose territories I reside on today, and to the Chippewa nation where I delivered my public talk.

Rajdeep Singh Gill is a cultural theorist, curator, and art historian. He teaches at the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design and is the co-founder of the Creativity Commons Collective and Press. He was named a Trudeau Scholar in 2006 and is the editor of the upcoming book Planetarity, Creativity and Social Justice. His writings have been published in Canada, India, the United States, China, Italy, Morocco and France.

Chronicles of a Summer Media Art Project

Agazi

My name is Agazi Afewerki and I'm a 20-year-old resident of Regent Park. I've been a participant of the Regent Park Focus summer program for the past two years. The program provides young people with an opportunity to learn all about photography, music and video production and to produce their own creations — all for free! This summer I was hired as a staff member. My task was to teach youth the skills that I had learned and to guide them through the making of their own videos. Once completed, the videos would eventually be shown on Regent Park TV, an Internet video streaming site dedicated to works produced in the Regent Park Focus program.

The 25 participants of this year's summer program were between the ages 12 and 14. This was a challenge because they entered the program with the mentality that this was a summer camp. At first, when it was time for them to attend workshops, take trips to production studios or be assigned tasks many of them felt as if it was a chore. Their attitudes changed as they became more involved in hands on production. We divided the participants into groups of five and each group had the support of one staff member. We wanted each group to create a video that was meaningful to them. However, when it was time for them to come up with subjects for their videos their idea's often involved simplistic or clichéd topics such as bullying, drug dealers or basketball. In my group, the youth wanted to do a story on playing video games. After brainstorming further, we decided that the video, titled *Grand Theft Auto*, would be a documentary on violent video games and the fascination with them among youth.

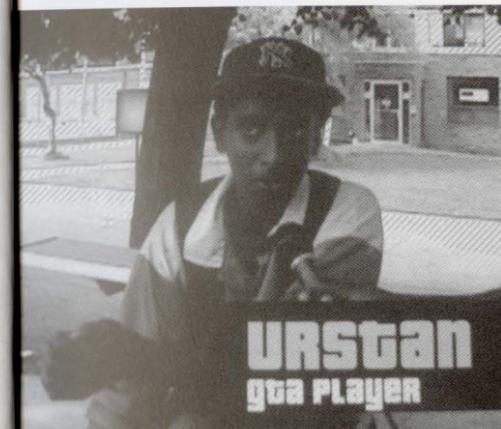


Nila

My name is Nilufar Zamani, aka Nila. I am 19 years old and first heard about Regent Park Focus through their website. I was so eager to become involved that right away I volunteered for the summer program. The program provided an opportunity for youth to learn about expressing themselves through music, video production and photography. The first week I was there, I could see in the participants' faces that they were excited to learn how to use a camera and how to write songs and make beats. And I myself was enthusiastic to be able to offer my leadership where I could.

The most significant project I worked on was with a group of young girls about women and Hijabs. This was such a great topic to work on for them because it really brought it home for the girls who, although from different cultural backgrounds, were all Muslim. I believe it gave them a great chance to explore their own beliefs and values while giving a much wider audience better insight into wearing the Hijab and its role in Islam.

I'm very impressed by what these girls have created. I'm sure that the girls are just as pleased to have created something of their own that they can be proud of.



Tyrone

My name is Tyrone MacLean-Wilson. I'm 21 years old. I am a resident of the Regent Park community and a full-time staff member of Regent Park Focus. My task in the 2006 summer program was to help the participants produce a documentary or drama piece that would be aired on Regent Park TV. We had to teach them how to use the equipment and how to direct their videos, but most of all we had to teach them how to work as a team. This summer would be the first time working with youth under the age of 15. Among my group there wasn't much enthusiasm about making a documentary, so I suggested that they consider producing a short drama video, perhaps even one about a super hero. This led to the creation of a character by the name of *Bike Man* who teaches bike riders about safety and the importance of locking up their bikes.

Judith

Hi, my name is Judith Reid. I am 24 years of age and volunteered this summer to learn video production. I was assigned to assist the group that was making *Bike Man*. After much planning, the day of shooting *Bike Man* arrived and we were confident that we had made the necessary preparations to complete the filming. We walked outside to the field behind Regent Park Focus and looked for a place to shoot the first scene. We needed somewhere the light was good, where the sun was behind us, and where the background environment was pleasant to look at. When we found a good location we had to work together to set up the shot. It takes a long time to get three minutes of video! There were numerous re-takes because of outside noise, the need to use different angles and acting mistakes. A lot of my job was keeping the group focused. At one point Nicholas, the main character, ran off with the reflector. More than once during shooting some members of the group were making funny faces causing the actors to laugh or lose concentration.

Everyone got a chance to direct a scene including the volunteers. When it was my turn I was nervous trying to come up with the best shots. While filming the scene, Kody, one of the actors, improvised and said something different from the line Tresvonne (one of the main scriptwriters) had written. I was sceptical about whether it would work. Tresvonne offered some further ideas on the spot. While we were deciding, the kids got frustrated with how long the filming was taking. At this point Kody set up the camera and directed the very scene he was acting in. In the end I don't remember if it was Kody's direction or mine that we ended up using in the video, but it didn't matter because all the footage looked great.



AJ

My name is Amanda J. Frick aka AJ. I am 20 years old and was brought in to the Regent Park Focus summer program to teach digital photography and Adobe Photoshop. After most youth completed their photography projects, I was assigned to facilitate a short video project with a group of preteen girls. Adonis, the Regent Park Focus coordinator, and I began the project by sitting with the girls to discuss current events with the hope of discovering something that really concerned them that they would like to make a drama video about. The girls weren't enthusiastic about any of our ideas and we were having a little bit of a tough time finding something that got them riled up. Someone piped in with the concept of globalization and slave labour in the garment industry, an issue that we had discussed in a human rights workshop a week prior and without any objections the girls decided to start writing a script for it.

The video drama was to be fast paced and exciting. The group decided that the video would be about a young person's struggle to confront and promote awareness among her peers of the sweat labour practices of a retail store that caters to youth. Youth who watched the video would be informed about globalization, sweatshop-free alternatives and show people that we consumers have the power to influence change.

Tyrone

Despite all the challenges it took only one day to film the *Adventures of Bikeman*. During the editing process, I made sure that each and every person that had worked on the film got to give their own input as to how they wanted the film edited. The youth loved watching the footage over and over again. They wanted to watch it so much that I found it difficult to get them to leave the editing room to do other activities.

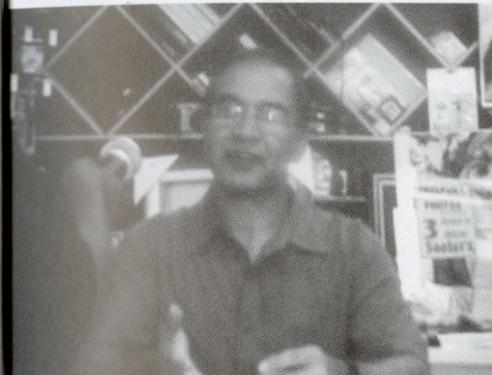
After seeing their results the group decided it would be a great idea to make a sequel. And after that they made another one! So over the course of the summer the group produced a total of three episodes.

In conclusion, I think the youth learned a lot in our program. They became very skilled with the mini-dv cameras and had a chance to see the power of teamwork in action. One of the key things I think the youth will take back with them from this experience is the sense that they have the power to create anything from their imagination.

Agazi

The group of youth I worked with on the *Grand Theft Auto* video enjoyed the process of production so much they wanted to do a second film. The first idea we had was to simply interview our parents, all of whom are immigrants, about their experiences of coming to Canada. However the challenge of each child lugging equipment home and remembering to bring it back each day quickly proved problematic. So the group did some problem solving and adjusted the idea to focus on immigrant storeowners in the neighbourhood. As they interviewed the various storeowners, the group began to understand that many of them had a high status of education in their home countries but found, upon coming to Canada, that their level of education was not recognized here. Opening their own businesses was one way to regain some economic control of their lives.

The end results of the various video projects were stellar. It was astonishing to see how far this group of energetic youth developed through two short months. At the beginning of the summer, most of the youth were shy, introverted individuals who had little to no knowledge about film, photography and song production. Through various workshops and hard work, they have developed many skills that are transferable to everyday life.



Judith

The lessons I learned this summer have been eye opening. I learned that directing involves two parts. The first part is mental: envisioning what you want in the frames and what you want conveyed. The second part is practical: going out to get the shot with unforeseen obstacles, using new ideas that emerge and bringing the storyboard to life. Or, you can "wing it" and rely on improvisation. Both can be done. I have learned about the technical aspects of video making and developed transferable skills of communication, problem solving, meeting deadlines and teamwork. On a personal level, I realized that I enjoy and work well with kids. No doubt, an invaluable summer.

The Adventures of Bikeman, Grand Theft Auto, The Hijab, What's Sweatshops Have To Do With Me and The Experiences of Immigrant Business People, were videos that were produced in the 2006 Regent Park Focus Youth Media Arts Centre Summer Program. The videos will be screened on 8 November 2006 at the Regent Park Film Festival and hosted on www.regentpark.tv

Amanda

When the day came to film our video drama about sweatshops it became evident through disputes about what kind of shots to use that we lacked the resources to fully shoot the script. For instance, we didn't even have use of a store to shoot the protests and the main scenes in. In the end we decided that the story was far too complicated and the group decided to switch the drama to a documentary. Unfortunately, by the time we had completed our interviews and were ready to edit, all the editing suites were in full use and our group had to wait for others to finish. Although our video would not be ready for screening at our graduation on the last day of the program, we all had fun and felt that we accomplished a great deal.

For more information about Regent Park Focus Youth Media Arts Centre visit www.catchdaflava.com



Khawla, Eman, Ameer Abu Draa, Doha Abu Draa, Jehan Abu Hamada, Ruby Said, *Memories of the Nakbe: 57 Years Later*, 2005. Courtesy: Balata Film Collective.

Resistance, Collective Memory and Creating Decolonized Territory

Vicky Moufawad-Paul in Conversation with Balata Film Collective's Ruby Said

The Balata Film Collective was initiated to enable young Palestinians from Balata to break their isolation, challenge their oppression and represent their lives to the world.

— Balata Film Collective Mandate¹

Situated near the town of Nablus, the Balata refugee camp is one of the largest communities in the West Bank. Balata has a population of 30,000 Palestinian refugees who live in one single square kilometer of heavily militarized land. Since their formation in November 2004, the Balata Film Collective has done a great deal to make their lives and struggles accessible to the international community.

The Balata Film Collective has made 13 videos available on their section of the “Balata Refugee Camp Community Website.” The collective has worked extensively on films and videos that address political imprisonment, children’s theater and dance, embroidery, martyrdom, commemoration of the Nakbe (catastrophe of 1948) and the contradiction of holding elections under military occupation.

Working to document their experiences, their history, their relationship to cultural identity and colonialism, the collective’s projects form a remarkable document. Their work speaks to the experiences of living under military occupation and apartheid while representing acts of resistance, beauty and complexity in daily life. Their subject matter aims to connect the Balata refugee community to Palestinian history and to strengthen their connection to cultural traditions and identity before the Nakbe.

Balata film and video makers present an alternative to mainstream media portrayals and assert the historical consciousness that is rooted in their community, which they support by drawing on and building upon a visual archive. As sole producers and distributors of their work, members of the Balata Film Collective exemplify the struggle of a colonized people to represent themselves. Making their films and videos available through their community website allows the international community to see through the eyes of the filmmakers. Their screenings are treated as opportunities for creating a decolonized territory, if only briefly. Distribution on their website also means that Palestinians in the diaspora can use these works to connect to their Palestinian

cultural identity, history and the part of their community that is most intensely affected by Israeli colonialism.

In Palestine, Israeli government and military forces control the movement of Palestinians through closures, check points, transferring of populations, shutting down of schools, unlawful imprisonment, unequal and apartheid policies and, of course, continual massacres like Deir Yassin (1948), Sabra and Shatila (1982) and Jenin (2002). The ability to transmit information and traditions from one generation to another is circumscribed when the living logic of a community and its historical and cultural trajectory are continually interrupted by the forced logic of colonialism under apartheid conditions.

Balata Film Collective’s videos make connections both to their community’s history and its cultural traditions as well as to the realities of Israeli occupation. For example, *Akoub the Challenge* examines how Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) have pushed people into collective resistance by making it increasingly difficult for them to harvest a vegetable that is an important part of Palestinian culinary tradition and thus cultural identity.² Numerous interviews depict the effects of Israeli restrictions and apartheid conditions: the Palestinian landowner in Hebron who is harassed and shot at when harvesting his crop; the Nablus market vendors who suffer at Israeli checkpoints bringing the vegetable from the harvest; the elderly woman who buys the vegetable, preserves a year’s worth of it and cooks it for her family; and the Israeli soldiers who tear open the sacks of akoub at checkpoints in order to damage the goods and humiliate their owner. A parable about Israeli apartheid, *Akoub the Challenge* illustrates how even Palestinian vegetables are subject to different laws than Israeli vegetation (the uprooting of olive trees in Palestinian orchards is a better-known example). The final scene — where we see Palestinians sharing a steaming plate of fried akoub — demonstrates that in the context of the unbearable Israeli apartheid, the simple act of dipping bread is an act of defiance and cultural preservation.

Jehan Abu Hamada, *Children of the Stones*, 2005. Courtesy: Balata Film Collective



In *Children of the Stones* (Direction: Jehan Abu Hamada/2005/Palestine/4:45min) a young girl, about 10 years old, wearing a yellow sweater, sits alone in front of a stone wall and sings. Her sincere expression and solemn song illustrate the moments of painful contradictions that Palestinian children witness. Her angelic face fades into a montage of iconic photographs from the recent Intifada: children and parents killed in each other's arms with Israeli tanks in the background, children confronting soldiers and tanks with stones, being chased by soldiers and of their families' mourning over their dead bodies. She sings,

He carried love in his heart and stones in his pocket
He lifted his left hand and said hello
In his right he carried stones / God bless his right hand
Oh god, protect the man who covers his face with a scarf
Film, world, film! While the blood flows
A Palestinian refuses to live humiliated
His head is always high / Even when the others are afraid

The song is briefly interrupted to interview children at a cemetery, one visiting his brother and another visiting his uncle. As the camera pans over numerous faces at the crowded yet quiet cemetery, the song resumes and eventually we return to the image of the girl in the yellow sweater as the short ends.

Prior to my interview with one of the Balata Collective Members, Ruby Said, I assumed that the cultural aspects of their videos were included for the education of those living in diaspora. Ruby explained that the traditional and cultural videos, like those about food and embroidery, are also made for the benefit of those living in the West Bank and Gaza. Their movements are so circumscribed and so many of their community members are imprisoned, killed or exiled, that it is very difficult for the community to access, retain and communicate cultural knowledge. It is not just the distance created by diaspora that alienates one from her cultural identity, but it is also the distance created by apartheid that separates one from her cultural identity as a colonized subject in her own land.

The following telephone interview was conducted on 5 June 2006 in Arabic and translated to English by Vicky Moufawad-Paul.

VICKY MOUFAWAD-PAUL: There has been a real buzz in Palestine solidarity communities about the Balata Film Collective, especially around the fact that anyone can download and publicly screen the videos the collective has made. Could you talk about the genesis of the collective? How was it originally formed?

RUBY SAID: During the beginning of the second Intifada there were three internationals staying in Balata. One of them, a woman from the United States named Abi, was staying at my house. She had a small video camera and a laptop. When attacks would happen she would go out and videotape. At night she would transfer the video to her computer. Since she was sleeping at my house I used to watch her and I wanted to learn about what she was doing. So one day I asked her to show me how she records the images. She began by showing me the basics.

Some of the girls from the camp went out on a day trip. I took the camera with us and recorded images of the mountains. When we returned I asked Abi if I could edit the video from the trip we took. She showed me how to edit.

The first video I made was *Akoub the Challenge*. I went out with Abi to Nablus and the Akoub was in bloom. Abi would suggest different angles but I was recording the images myself. She supported me in learning how to make my vision into a video on the Akoub documentary.

The second piece I worked on is called *Children of the Stones*. It is very short. All of my videos tend to be short. This video was about children in the camp. I would go out and record times of the confrontations and how the children deal with the Zionist army entering the camp. At night when I returned home I would transfer the video to the computer. Of course I would make a rough cut of the day's footage. This is how I began.

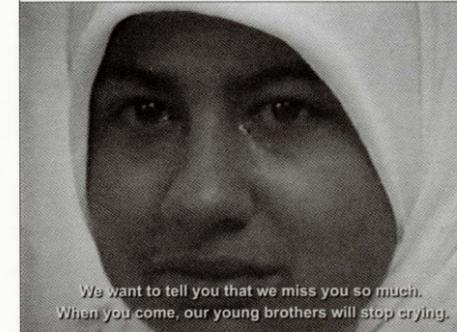
VMP: It is really interesting that the internationals did not approach you and ask if you wanted to learn to make videos, but that you saw them working and you approached them.

RS: I told them that they are internationals documenting our lives, but they are not Palestinians. Why should a foreign person represent the struggles of my people? We should be representing ourselves. I wanted to document and represent my own history. But they did support me in learning how to use the tools. The internationals helped me begin on this path; they opened a new road for me and I feel that I have been empowered.

VMP: How did the collective access its video equipment? Was there NGO support?

RS: There has never been NGO support for the project. The three individuals did some fundraising in their communities in the United States and the UK so that they were able to leave behind a camera and laptop.

The collective really began when a group of women were released from an Israeli prison. Many of these girls were very good friends of mine. Each of them had just served one to two years. This is when we rented a space. The collective started out as only women and eventually we had eight women and two men in our membership.



Abdel-Karim Hussein and Atheer Sa'eed, *Women in Death Castles*, 2005. Courtesy: Balata Film Collective.

Female ex-prisoners recall their time in Israeli interrogation and detention centers in Women in Death Castles (Camera: Abdel-Karim Hussein and Atheer Sa'eed/Editing: Fatima Alkhafesh and Abdel-Karim Hussein/Co-ordination: Mu'ain Kuu'a and Rahma Rabi'a/General Co-ordination: 'Ala Naaser/Translation: Ahmed Ziat and MikaMinio-Paluello/2005/Palestine/6:37min). A woman describes her experience of being in an isolation cell for three weeks, beaten with batons, having gas sprayed in her face (permanently damaging her eyesight) and being given no medical attention. Another explains that she had committed no crime to confess to during the psychological torture of being handcuffed to a chair for hours, having her face covered with a bag, threatened with rape and sleep deprived. Interspersed among the women's testimonies are the children of a prisoner quietly crying and expressing their longing for their mother's release. The eldest daughter describes the way her mother was taken in the middle of the night, literally ripped out of her children's arms.

The first video we made collectively was *Memories of the Nakbe*. On this project I taught the other women how to use the video camera and the editing suite and how to come up with ideas for a video. All of the ideas the women came up with were about Palestine. That was the only thing on our minds.

After a while we decided to close down the space because we had to pay rent and times got difficult. The computer and the camera have become broken from so much use. We can't afford to fix them, and that has stopped us from working on the videos. I'm the only one from the original group who is still making videos because I got a job at the Yaffa Cultural Centre and I can now use that space and equipment.

VMP: When you went to the US on the tour [May 2006] did people donate video equipment?



Khawla, Eman, Ameera Abu Draa, Doha Abu Draa, Jehan Abu Hamada, Ruby Said, *Memories of the Nakbe: 57 Years Later*, 2005. Courtesy: Balata Film Collective.

Memories of the Nakbe: 57 Years Later (Direction: Khawla, Eman, Ameera Abu Draa, Doha Abu Draa, Jehan Abu Hamada, Ruby Said/Translation: Fayrouz/2005/Palestine/6 min) focuses on oral history as a tool for remembering and writing history. The testimonies of two elderly women intimately illustrate the experience of becoming a refugee as the land was violently depopulated during the Nakbe. Archival photographs from 1948 are used to support their personal memories of historical events.

rs: They gave us a camera and a laptop. The laptop does not have video editing software on it. We have no way of getting the software here without paying more than we can afford. We use the camera to document things, but we have no way of editing them. So we haven't posted a new video to the website in a long time.

VMP: The website seems key to the success of the collective. What is so impressive about the website is that it makes your videos very accessible to an international audience. How did the collective decide to independently distribute the videos via the website?

rs: The idea of the website was started by the internationals but is maintained by members of the collective. Once we finish a video and have what we feel is a final version I have a password that lets me enter the site and add material. I was the main person adding the videos to the website.

VMP: What kind of computer experience did you have before the collective?

rs: I didn't know anything about computers before this all started. My work at the Yaffa Cultural Centre is enriched because of my experience with computers. I teach computer classes to adults and children. I also teach videography to adults. Right now I'm one month into teaching a three-month course on videography and editing to 25 women. I consider the course a success if we can create a video together by the end of the three months.

VMP: It seems like there are two broad themes in the videos, one being the desire to document and to show the world what life is like under Israeli apartheid. On the other hand some of your work tries to preserve and connect with Palestinian identity and culture pre-Nakbe.

rs: Before you make a video about confrontations between children and the Israeli military, for example, you have to educate people about the fact that there used to be a country called Palestine. That as Palestinians

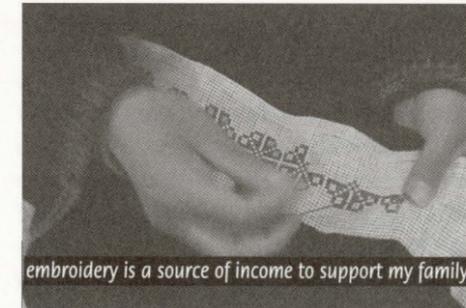
we have rights and we have land. We are not the way the Israelis describe us and the way they try to make us appear. We want to show people what the Zionists did to us, how they stole our land and created the current situation. This is why we show people our history. We show old photographs and we show how people used to live before the Nakbe. We aim to make it clear that for every Palestinian there is a home and land; we did not take land from the Zionists, they took it from us.

VMP: After seeing *Akoub the Challenge* on your website I asked my grandmother about the vegetable. She was surprised, laughed and asked how I had heard about it [Ruby laughs]. It is not available here in Canada and she hasn't eaten it since she was a child in pre-1948 Palestine. She was thrilled to have her granddaughter access this obscure piece of Palestinian culture. A particular food is something so simple but it can easily be forgotten. In a way, it is not as simple as it seems, because of the social relations governing its production and consumption.

rs: Akoub passes through a number of stages. How you bring it down from the mountains, how you clean it, how it is sold, how it is cooked, how you eat it. The use of Akoub is a very old custom and soon people will forget it. I made the documentary so that people would remember that it is part of our traditions.

VMP: As you were saying before, we have land, and on that land specific things happen. Akoub is symbolic of traditions that can only be reproduced in Palestine because that is where it grows.

rs: I also show that the Zionists have occupied the mountains, and since Akoub grows there it becomes very hard for us to continue to use it. It is illegal for us to go to the mountains and thus almost impossible for us to gather Akoub. In this way, for those who pay attention to the documentary, they realize that even something as simple as Akoub is a way of relating to the land of Palestine and understanding the current apartheid situation.



Eman Abu Rajab. *The Palestinian Tradition of Embroidery Under the Zionist Occupation*, 2005. Courtesy: Balata Film Collective.

embroidery is a source of income to support my family

Embroidery is one of the ways in which Palestinian women circumvent the Israeli economy and connect with traditions that date back to the Roman era. In The Palestinian Tradition of Embroidery Under the Zionist Occupation (Direction: Eman Abu Rajab/Editing: Jehad Abu Rajab, Im Islam Abu Rajab, Im Samir Abu Rajab, Remah Habayeb/Translation: Fairuz/Music: Zahra'a Al Badrasawi, Im Sami, Im Hakam/2005/Palestine/6min) women describe their embroidery work as a way of supporting their families while many of their husbands are in prison or unemployed. One woman explains that while in Israeli prison people are forbidden from continuing their university education, so her daughter, who has served one year of a three-year sentence, has learnt embroidery.

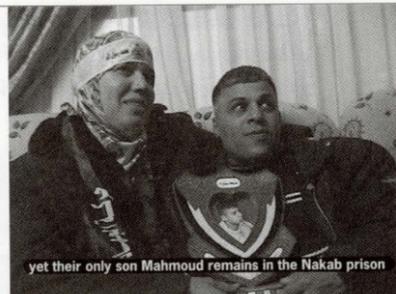
VMP: I also want to ask you about the work that is more news documentation oriented. What is nice about it is that it is not foreign people representing Palestinian women in refugee camps; you are representing yourselves. Has anyone ever questioned the strategies that you use?

rs: When I was in the US showing the work of the collective someone asked me why my work doesn't show the situation that Palestinians live in. This person

claimed that I focus on everyday things, customs, traditions and common actions. He would have preferred that I show the effects of the occupation and how that affects the way we live in the camps. My response was that as Palestinians we eat, drink and sleep, you know, that we are not constantly working for liberation and involved in the anti-colonial struggle. We are also just like any other people and this is important to show. But as Palestinians we are alone in our struggle; no one is helping us or walking with us.

VMP: Do you see your work as art or activism?

RS: I see it as art and activism at the same time. When I'm working on a video, first of all I put my life in



Mohammed Faraj, Mohammed Ziade and Mohammed Ayyesh, *Grass Doesn't Grow in the Camp*, 2005. Courtesy: Balata Film Collective.

yet their only son Mahmoud remains in the Nakab prison

This is the story of man who was sent to Israeli military prison for twenty years. At the time of his imprisonment his wife was two months pregnant with their son. The father and son met for the first time years later, when the son was also imprisoned. The day of the father's release after serving his full twenty years is the day that Balata Film Collective Members joined the family and recorded Grass Doesn't Grow in the Camp (Direction: Mohammed Faraj, Mohammed Ziade and Mohammed Ayyesh/Editing: Mohammed Ziade/Translation: Ahmed Ziat/Palestine/2005/6 min). The reunion of a husband and wife, a man with his brother and with his entire community is joyfully and heart-wrenchingly rendered.

danger, as I stand before the military. The circumstances are difficult; the images I record are very painful. But when I'm doing this work I feel that I'm accomplishing something. That as a Palestinian I'm not just passively watching. I am resisting. My strategy of resistance is to show people what is happening in Palestine. I'm very happy when I make videos about Palestine and people all over the world can see them.

VMP: What is the future of your video work?

RS: When we were in the US we were taken on a one-day tour of a TV station. The manager of the station promised us that he would give us three-months training in television production: videography, editing and story creation. He would show us how to make professional news pieces. With the hopes of creating a TV station in Palestine in the Balata camp in Nablus. He said that three of us could run the station. Myself, one of the men I was on the tour with and a third person. But the problem is how to get a US visa for three months. We met lots of people, we became very close with people in the Palestine solidarity community in the US and these people want to help us. We hope that we will be able to continue doing our work with the support of the international community and the Palestinian diaspora.

AFTERWORD:

The work of the Balata collective can best be understood as what a group of Latin American theorists, revolutionaries and filmmakers called "third cinema": "[T]he revolutionary opening towards a cinema outside and against the System, in a cinema of liberation."³ Third cinema is as an important part of anticolonial movements because, "just as they are not masters of the land upon which they walk, the [colonized] people are not masters of the ideas that envelop them."⁴ While the political and military tactics of the revolution are aimed at freeing land and economy, the artistic tactics of the revolution are aimed at freeing the histories, memories and minds of the colonized people. A crucial aspect of third cinema is its archival function as it aims

to protect against the forgetting of the past and the homogenization of cultures by the colonizer.

With the mandate of documenting the colonial relationship and their resistance to it, the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) had a film unit that began in 1968, just after Israel expanded its borders and occupied the West Bank and Gaza. Based in Lebanon, the Film Unit engaged in documenting Palestinian resistance activities throughout the Middle East. Khadija, a former member of the PLO Film Unit explained the significance of this work: "People who had seen themselves as helpless and powerless refugees could now watch the fighters. This gave them power and a sense of identity. It was as if we existed outside time and space. We were building a dream that made us fly."⁵ Compiled over 13 years, this huge film archive was lost during the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. The three large underground air-conditioned storage rooms of film archives might have been destroyed in one of the many fires that claimed Beirut or the archive might have been stolen by the IDF.

In contrast to the PLO film unit, the Balata Film Collective has the advantage of current digital technology. However, more recent examples show digital technology does not stop the colonial attempt to destroy history. Near Bethlehem, in the West Bank community of Dheisheh camp, a group of refugees established the Ibdah Centre. In 1999 their main project was to use the Internet to communicate across borders with Palestinian refugees in camps in Jordan and Lebanon. On 26 August 2000, all the computers in Dheisheh were destroyed and no one was ever found responsible.⁶ In the spring of 2002 the IDF engaged in systematic destruction of libraries and archives, including all of the computer equipment, in the West Bank and Gaza. Their targets included universities, radio and television stations, human rights and health organizations, cultural centers and Palestinian Authority government documents.⁷ Digital technologies give the Balata Collective the ability to distribute their work immediately and internationally thus allowing for multiple

archival sites. At the same time, this wider reach makes them more of a threat and thus subject to colonial efforts to suppress and eradicate them. The destruction of the culture and history of Palestinians is part of Israeli apartheid. As Franz Fanon explains, "[c]olonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip ... By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it."⁸

In a side discussion with Ruby Said, I mentioned the above notions and examples and asked her what she thought. Not surprisingly, she did not know how to respond. The Balata Film Collective is well aware of the added risks to their safety because of the work they are doing, but their desire to be heard is far greater than their fear. Thus, despite the barriers of poverty, marginality and a world system that seems bent on supporting the annihilation of their people, the Balata Film Collective is doing independent media activism at its most urgent and heroic.

Notes:

1. www.balatacamp.net/website/filmcollective/index.htm.
2. *Akoub the Challenge* (Dir. Ruby Said, Camera. Madlen Said, 2005, Palestine, 5 min).
3. Fernando Solanas and Octavio Gettino, "Towards a Third Cinema," *Film and Theory: An Anthology*, Robert Stam and Toby Miller, eds. (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), p. 273.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 268.
5. *Kings and Extras: Digging For A Palestinian Image* (Dir. Azza al-Hassan, 2004, Palestine/Germany, 63 min).
6. Edward W. Said, "The Public Role of Writers and Intellectuals," *The Nation*, (September 17, 2001).
7. Tom Twiss, "Damage to Palestinian Libraries and Archives during the Spring of 2002," in *International Responsibilities Task Force of the American Library Association's Social Responsibilities Round Table* www.pitt.edu/~twiss/irtf/palestinilbsdmg.html.
8. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*. (New York: Grove Press, 1963), p. 210.

Vicky Moufawad-Paul is a Palestinian film and video artist. She is the programming/exhibitions coordinator at A Space Gallery in Toronto. She has an MFA in Film and Video from York University and is the former executive director of the Toronto Arab Film Festival.

Why People Love Cowboys: A Very Partial Review of *The American West* book and exhibition

curated by Jimmie Durham and Richard William Hill.
Compton Verney, 25 June – 29 August 2005

review by Janna Graham

I have to say that I really don't like cowboys.

So the prospect of entering Jimmie Durham and Richard William Hill's exhibition *The American West* required some resolve.

The American West was held in the summer of 2005 at Compton Verney, an 18th century gentleman's country-home turned art gallery in the Warks of England. The exhibition and book co-curated by Hill and Durham offer a powerful critique of the mythologies of the American West and their role in continually disseminating and activating the propaganda of genocide.

Through an impressive, if disheartening, and incredibly prolific assemblage, including photographs, vernacular materials, paintings, movie posters and kitsch, collected from cowboy museums, truck-stops and tourist destinations across the us, the curators illustrate the way and degree to which the myth of the West continues to extend into all aspects of visual, political and everyday life in America, evident in everything from Kennedy's space program to the current war in Iraq. Their analysis is poignantly supported by their inclusion of work by a range of contemporary artists from across the Americas, who invert, provoke, interrogate and complicate the visual language that supports this backbone of American political rhetoric and action.



Bar interior, La Jolla Indian Reservation, California, 2005. Photo: Richard William Hill.

So why, then, when walking through the exhibition preview accompanied by dozens of members of the international press, did I hear more professions of cowboy love than I care to recall?

"I love cowboys"

In response to these strange enunciations, co-curator of the exhibition Jimmie Durham made the following necessarily stark statement on opening night: "The thing about cowboys is, cowboys kill Indians"

The room was silent.

We all know this to be the case. So why does the cowboy manage a zombie-like surviving trick time and time again?

There is something in this love for the image of the West that seems to keep it out of bounds, beyond grasp and critique. This was the case for the reviewer of the exhibition in *Frieze* magazine, who found it appropriate to lament the exhibition's "venial sin of omission" of the "majestic Victorian landscapes of Frederic Remington and Albert Bierstadt," as if a shared adoration and nostalgia for these images supersedes any political critique.

Seduced by Western reverie, he also felt at ease accusing Durham and Hill (of Cherokee and Cree ancestry respectively) of partiality for including First Nations Canadian and Mexican artists in a show about America, showing complete disregard (though more likely total ignorance) for the rejection that the curators make of these borders, whose assertions and excessive "protection" are both strategies of an ongoing colonial project and irrelevant to the way in which a global imaginary, supported by the visual culture of the West, knows no boundaries when it comes to the ongoing repression of first peoples and countless others in the Americas. Most annoyingly perhaps, the reviewer accused the curators of not recognizing the "sympathy" to be found in James Fraser's *End of the Trail*, an 18' monument of a dying Indian found in front of America's National Cowboy Museum (and replicated on everything from urinal walls to beer coasters across the southern us).

In the exhibition's catalogue, Hill rightfully describes Fraser's iconic image as a "monument to genocide," whose endless circulation should be unthinkable. James Luna's *End of the Frail*, two photographs in which the artist appears on a work-horse, with a bottle in his hand, supports this characterization.

Knowing this, how can unfettered cowboy love endure?

For one suggestion, we might turn to Dolly Parton who, in *A Cowboy's Ways* sings, "And it's pride that keeps him standing when he should be on his knees, makin' apologies" (but, of course, "she loves him desperately"). Here, Dolly has hit the nail on the head — the cowboy is the classic perpetrator of domestic abuse, one whose

power lies in his ability to constantly distance himself from his own acts of unspeakable violence (often against those he supposedly loves — perhaps this is the "sympathy" of which the *Frieze* reviewer speaks). He exists in a state of exception, what Hill in his catalogue essay calls "cowboy justice." This exceptionalism, Hill observes, underwrites America's approach to domestic and foreign policy as seen most recently in the political rhetoric surrounding the war in Iraq.

We may also credit Dolly for identifying "stubborn pride" as essential to the cowboy's durability. Hill uncovers a poem on the website of the Western Movies Channel (an illustrated version of which has become part of the White House Collection), entitled *Cowboy Up America. Cowboy'n Up*, it seems, means never giving up, rather "Ridin' hard and shootin' straight."

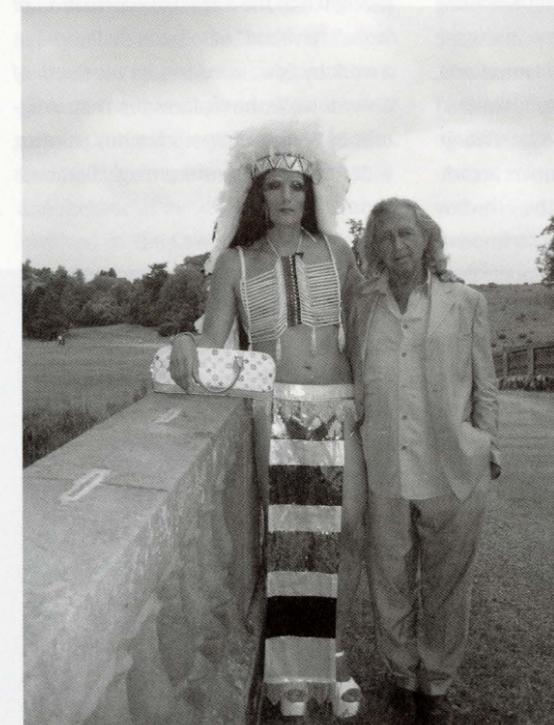
A few of its lines, also included in the exhibition catalogue, are worth noting here:

Let's cowboy up, pull our hats down tight. Be rough and ready for the fight...

Stand up tall and fore we're through We'll kick 'em right in their gee-had 'Cause now they've made the cowboys mad...

Durham, Hill and artists in *The American West* exhibition lend us a veritable corral of examples of the persistence of Cowboy Up tenacity.

For her work titled *Cowboys*, Maria Thereza Alves hangs hundreds of images of cowboys taken from the Internet, including popular references to Hollywood movie posters, cowboy churches, clothing etc. In the mix are also images of American artist-cowboys in the figures of Bruce Nauman and James Turrell. Their poses directly mimic the masculine, contemplative and quietly heroic stances of Hollywood's images, looking out to an empty frontier — whether it be an art



Jimmie Durham and Kent Monkman pictured at Compton Verney, 2006. Photo: Gisèle Gordon.

market in search of the new preoccupation for the monied classes, or a wild landscape that needs to reap profits for a burgeoning nation.

Images of Buffalo Bill posters in the exhibition are also reminders of the way in which art and entertainment support the project of Western capitalist expansion, the mechanics of which are clearly staged in two photographs of turn of the century American painter Charles Schreyvogel: one with a cowboy posing on his rooftop in Hoboken, New Jersey (far away from the American West in which he was depicted) and, another, tellingly, of him painting with his back to an unidentified Aboriginal man and child.

Kent Monkman reveals the sublime affects used by 19th century artists to disseminate colonial ideology: the empty land, the tragic, dying savage, the heroic and somewhat sympathetic cowboy, the aura of manifest destiny. In the *St. Thomas Trilogy* (named after Thomas Scott, famously put to execution by Louis Riel), that was hung alongside "real" 19th century landscape paintings from us cowboy museums, Monkman has perfected the techniques of Bierstadt, Thomas Cole, Goya, George Catlin, so much so that art couriers accompanying paintings from the cowboy museums quizzed each other to find out who brought them. He replaces their familiar narratives with an unfolding story in which Scott's execution is momentarily interrupted by a native drag queen, the artist as his alter-ego, Miss Chief Share Eagle Testickle, here appearing as Thomas' lover, but flirting with Riel.

Moving from the American West to the English countryside, Miss Chief Share makes another appearance: at the exhibi-

tion's opening, again on horseback. Along the path across Compton Verney's well-groomed lawns, and towards a crowd of midlands gentry, she rides while quoting the painter George Catlin. Accompanied by two very sprightly men in Robin Hood attire, she engages in a display of archery, shadow theatre, frolicking around the grounds. She reminds the crowd, as Durham points out in his "Anatomy of a Cowboy," that the figures of a distant, rugged and brut imaginary might have found their training in domestication, here, among Britain's ruling class.

In this, one can't help remembering General Wolfe's famous statement, before the battle that led to his death, "we must teach these scoundrels [speaking of the French in Canada] to make war in a more gentleman like manner." (a sentiment now echoed in the daily news reports in England, citing the need for British troops to retrain their brutish American counterparts in Iraq).

Reference to the ongoing perpetuation of Wolfe's "civilized" heroism is challenged in a work by Edward Poitras. In his *Death of General Wolfe*, he replaces the central figures of Benjamin West's famous painting with three Native and seemingly homeless

men in an urban alley. In his rendering, there are no noble Indians looking on. It is a reminder of the legacy of Wolfe's "heroism" in the ongoing poverty of Aboriginal people today, the everyday attempts to work against this legacy, and the way in which "gentlemanly" violence and repression continue to underwrite colonial agendas in the Americas.

Other artists in the show provoke the ways in which contemporary representations perform updated versions of these distancing effects.

Terrence Houle's photograph *Red Handed* (2004) for example, mocks the motif of the tragic Indian, whose very survival renders him hopelessly caught in the wrong time. In his photograph, a young, very urban looking young man (the artist), dressed in regalia is caught in the headlights of a car. The freezing effect of the headlights (reminiscent of capture scenes used on the television program *Cops*) parodies the idea that his regalia might constitute a secret identity, living illegally in the present. Houle's use of the headlight as spotlight inverts the very public way in which Native identity is fixed in Hollywood representations, and points us to the complexity of negotiating this identity in private life.



Terrence Houle, *Redhanded*, 2004. Photo: Jarusha Brown. Courtesy: the artist.

Lori Blondeau's *Lonely Surfer Squaw* parodies other contemporary representational tropes: one, the squaw/princess dichotomy that characterizes popular representations of Native women and two, the trope of complete and utter invisibility. A billboard-sized image of her in a fun fur bikini with pink surfboard in hand, installed in Compton Verney's gardens, a weekend tourist destination, replaces the static representation of similarly scaled roadside stand-ups, both refusing such images and poking fun at the dominant representational option available to women of the American West: booby surfer-chick.

Reminding us of the way in which "civilization" serves as a pretext for colonial injustice, Nadia Myre's beaded *Indian Act* draws attention to the paternalistic 1867 document ironically subtitled, "an act respecting Indians" — that sought to name and subjugate the very personal identifications and affinities of Aboriginal people to the Department of Indian Affairs. She interferes, never allowing us to see the script itself, which has been beaded over by communities who collectively render abstract that which operated to constrain and objectify.

We are also led to an understanding of the violence that underwrote, indeed necessitated such a magnitude of widespread, if amateur, dramaturgy. A series of ledger drawings, created by Littleman Galloping in 1894–95 while held in a us army camp in Florida depict scenes of vastly outnumbered native men, facing their death at the hand of dozens of uniformed troops. There is not a cowboy in sight.

Alan Michelson's work *He(a)rd*, a sound piece, in which we hear buffalo running across the plains, punctuates the endless

circulation of images in the exhibition. The sound is a kind of haunting, an overwhelming reminder of the enormity and depth of fear that runs beneath the desire to conquer and control difference and the unknown.

This fear is addressed by catalogue writer Jean Fisher, who speculates on the profoundly unsettling European discovery of the Americas as a giant, and independent, landmass. The response to the trauma of this "radical otherness" she proposes, was the creation of a self-identity for Europeans constructed on the misrepresentation [and military repression] of indigenous people. Enter: the "undomesticated" Wildman, of Greek Antiquity, the Judeo-Christian notion of wildness as the vast, empty terrain of "threat, promise, penitence and salvation," all of which underwrite the acting out of a response to the unknown in military rampage, murder, theft, dislocation, incarceration.

Jen Budney gives us tremendous insight into the everyday lives of contemporary cowboys — and the ways in which American West mythologies gain potency through continued valorization of settler culture in the telling of family histories. Budney discusses the contradictory political rhetoric of her own family members involved in the Cowboy Action Shooting Club in Alberta as a mask for other tales — of rape, paedophilia and incest.

In its multifaceted analysis, the exhibition points us toward the West's aporetic lasso. If the American West is the stuff of myth and cinema, held in place by desire, repetition and ultimately the performance of people in their everyday lives, on what front(s) do we put forward our critique? We cannot simply expose its staging. So then,

do we work within its representational logic, and do it so well, that, as do many of the artists in the exhibition, we point to its holes, its fictions, its complicated workings? If we break into its logic, turn it against itself, will we have the tools to work against it? How then do we address the complex ways in which the ideology of the West continues to mask and support interests — whether they be the repression of painful events, increased power for right wing values or capitalist expansion?

To help us continually probe these questions is the exhibition's brilliant catalogue — which likely won't make it to as many bookstores as it should, and to my mind should be standard issue for every high school and university student in Britain and North America. It conveys what was so important about this exhibition: that artists, curators and catalogue writers working through a set of dynamics so complicated and so infuriating are able to probe the legacies of the West through humour, intelligence, friendship and an approach that refuses the mindless, propagandistic nature of cowboy love. As the cowboys of our time attempt to ride into the sunset, we might take note of these strategies for analysis and resistance.

Janna Graham developed exhibitions and programmes in collaboration with artists and community organizers at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto for many years. She is a contributing editor for *Fuse Magazine* and has worked on education, curatorial and writing projects with Artcirc, De-Ba-Jeh-Mu-Jig Theatre Group, Mercer Union, Project Art Centre, 16 Beaver, Ultra-red, Vanabbe Museum, the Whitechapel Art Gallery and others. She is currently living in London, teaching and working towards a PhD in visual cultures at Goldsmiths College.

Thinking the Next Step: Norval Morrisseau — Shaman Artist

3 February – 30 April 2006
curated by Greg Hill
National Gallery of Canada and touring

review by Erin Morton

One might expect that the first solo exhibition of an Aboriginal artist at the National Gallery might spark a number of responses from critics and scholars in the Canadian art community. Such an exhibition — of Morrisseau or any Aboriginal artist — is long overdue. The Gallery could similarly be criticized for waiting to launch this retrospective until Morrisseau's battle with Parkinson's disease has left him almost without the ability to speak.

Such criticisms are no doubt valid, yet they place a tremendous burden on one exhibition. The National Gallery has long been charged with historical absences along raced, classed and gendered lines. These criticisms alone do not address museums' attempts to "manage" cultural difference in pluralist states such as Canada, a process that defines culture as the aura perceived by one group when it comes into contact with and examines another, and difference as a problem that requires an administrative solution within the institution itself.

Perhaps a more fruitful line of inquiry might centre on what the Gallery intends as its anticipated result, the next step, so to speak. For this reason, "Shaman Artist" could provide a moment of inquiry on the current state of the relationship between museums and Aboriginal peoples.

"Shaman Artist" brings together 59 pieces by Morrisseau, highlighting the spiritual quality of his artistic production and exposing the fluctuating boundary between Morrisseau's art and his shamanism. Indeed the renegotiation of boundaries is an overarching theme of this show: curator Greg Hill posits Morrisseau as an artist who has previously been classified according to "the available categories of the primitive, the folk, and the modern."² In other words, art critics have had a hard time deciding in the past exactly what art historical category Morrisseau's work should be slotted into, leading Hill to explain it as "a completely new art movement...more recently known as the 'Anishnaabe School' of painting — a potent symbol of Aboriginal cultural expression in central Canada."³

While the chronological arrangement of the works could be interpreted as a progression from what might conventionally be understood as Indian art toward more Eurocentric notions of Modernism, such a reading would not challenge these concepts or how such categories have been historically constituted. I would suggest that this arrangement of Morrisseau's work provides a way to challenge historically constructed object categories in the first place. For instance, how does one police the boundaries of authenticity here? Or



Norval Morrisseau, *Indian Jesus Christ*, 1974.
Courtesy: National Gallery of Canada.

further, why does this arrangement necessitate progression rather than a movement that is more dialogic, between Morrisseau-as-artist, Morrisseau-as-shaman, and the people and practices that affect and are affected by his cultural production?

Another boundary that Hill highlights is that between Aboriginality and histories of colonialism. Works such as *Lily of the Mohawk* (1974), *Indian Jesus Christ* (1974), *The Gift* (1975) and *The Land (Land Rights)* (1976) expose Morrisseau's refusal to slot Aboriginality along any predetermined polarity that would posit "colonized" and "colonizer" at opposing ends of a spectrum. The canvasses are all typical of Morrisseau's technique, described by Ruth Phillips as an "x-ray" style, in which skeletal elements and internal organs such as the heart are shown.⁴ Such elements identify figures as animals, shamans, and humans — in this case, both white and Aboriginal — in ways that speak to Morrisseau's critiques of various political conflicts and exchanges. For instance, referencing the layered and mutating ways in which Aboriginal and colonial histories intersect and inform one another, *Lily of the Mohawk* and *Indian Jesus Christ* depict Aboriginal figures as saint-like bodies. Like Morrisseau's own upbringing, which Phillips describes as "a catalogue of the cultural and educational conflicts, the abuses, and the dangers to which Aboriginal people were routinely subjected during the middle decades of the twentieth century,"⁵ this exhibition visually renders the dialogic cultural movement that has developed between Aboriginal people and the dominant culture. Crosses and halos exist in the same space and time as thunderbirds and shamans, collating in a visual language that speaks about contemporary Aboriginality in a



Norval Morrisseau, *The Land (Land Rights)*, 1976. Courtesy: National Gallery of Canada.

post-colonial world. As land claim disputes continue to mark the pages of Canadian newspapers, images such as *The Gift* — depicting the European transfer of both Christianity and disease to Aboriginal people — and *The Land (Land Rights)* — which exposes the liminal space that Aboriginal people occupy in post-colonial societies — can be understood as knowledge economies that refer both to hegemonic relationships and to reciprocally appropriative exchanges.

While much media criticism surrounding "Shaman Artist" is largely centred on the discriminatory policies of museums such as the National Gallery, Hill's show is met



Norval Morrisseau, *Artist and Shaman Between Two Worlds*, 1980. Courtesy: National Gallery of Canada.

with a great deal of praise from critics who hope that this exhibition might “very well be the final nail in the coffin of institutionalized discrimination against First Nations art.”⁶ While it is dangerous to suggest that one large-scale exhibition instantly demolishes systemic structures of oppression, this show and others like it clearly have the possibility of challenging and resisting dominant systems that have historically decided who and what is included when and where. In my understanding, this means that when in his introductory catalogue notes Hill comments that “Morrisseau has been described as a national treasure,” it is with an acute understanding of both the need for celebration and for reckoning at this time.⁷

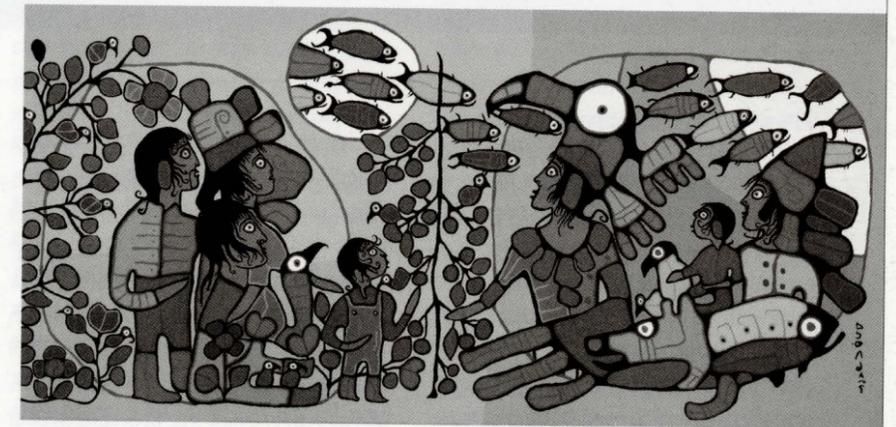
The reckoning called for here reflects what Irit Rogoff has recently described as the

need to move “beyond the supposition that absences need to be compensated for by the constitution of symbolic presences, and beyond the understanding that memory can directly or indirectly be recovered ...”⁸ Along the standard reading of histories of violence such as those imposed upon and resisted by Aboriginal populations in Canada, the aftermaths of oppression and exclusion demand to be recompensed. Such are the driving forces between any critical inquiries — deconstructive or not — denoting the idea that in order to engage with cultural difference, museums must atone for and replace historical voids.

In the case of Morrisseau, Hill seems to make a resolute attempt to move beyond conventional interpretations of absence and presence. The decision to mount

“Shaman Artist” as a chronological retrospective, while perhaps not revisionary on the surface, does provide a way to discuss cultural difference in the museum. Now that an Aboriginal artist has been showcased at the National Gallery in a way that has previously been reserved for the likes of canonically entrenched figures in Canadian art such as Tom Thomson and Joyce Weiland, do the rules change? Can Hill mount an exhibition in this way without being criticized as reproducing the same art historical devices that have historically constituted the Artist-Genius in the first place? Now that Modernism has successfully advanced many of its ideals and metanarratives, in turn leading revisionist accounts of art history to challenge the hierarchical nature of museological categories, can this type of exhibition succeed? Further, does “Shaman Artist” effectively renegotiate the boundaries of cultural difference in a museum setting in the same way that it challenges the boundaries imposed upon Morrisseau himself? Does it successfully challenge the overarching systemic conflicts between “hegemonic and marginally located cultures”⁹ that allow such categories to function in the first place?

The relinquishing that Rogoff refers to calls for the museum to renounce its authority to determine the direction, the aim or the outcome of the story — the structure and the nature of the historical narrative it normally seeks to construct. To put it more simply, it calls for the National Gallery to relinquish its assumed authority to determine how Morrisseau’s works fit into the story, what his work does to affect it or how it affects his work. This is the type of institutional power and control that must be surrendered by institutions in order to ensure that the anticipated



Norval Morrisseau, *Observations of the Astral World* c. 1994. Courtesy: National Gallery of Canada.

outcome will be different than it has been in the past. This moment in the Gallery’s history will hopefully be used in a way that steers the debate away from a project of inclusiveness, not, as Rogoff so aptly observes, “because those politics had been successfully transformed but because cultural politics always have to exist and run on several parallel planes concurrently, simultaneously doing the current work and thinking the next step.”¹⁰ Indeed, this is probably a very good critical position for Hill to take and for Morrisseau to be placed within, something that will hopefully lead to a step in the right direction for the National Gallery.

Notes:

1. See Fredric Jameson, “On ‘Cultural Studies,’” *Social Text* 34 (1993) and Richard Day, *Multiculturalism and the History of Canadian Diversity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999).
2. Ruth B. Phillips, “Morrisseau’s ‘Entrance’: Negotiating Primitivism, Modernism, and Anishnaabe Tradition,” in *Norval Morrisseau — Shaman Artist* (Ottawa: National Gallery Of Canada, 2006), p.68.

3. Greg Hill, “Norval Morrisseau — Shaman Artist,” in *Norval Morrisseau — Shaman Artist*, p.13.
4. Phillips, p.74.
5. *Ibid.*, p.50.
6. Paul Gessell, “Native art show brings end to gallery’s cultural ‘apartheid,’” *CanWest News* (29 January 2006); Hill, “Preface,” in *Norval Morrisseau — Shaman Artist*, p.11.
7. Phillips, p. 50.
8. Irit Rogoff, “Hit and Run — Museums and Cultural Difference,” *Art Journal* 61.3 (2002), p.64.
9. Rogoff p.66.
10. Rogoff p.73.

Erin Morton is a PhD candidate and Teaching Fellow in the Department of Art at Queen’s University. She specializes in Canadian visual culture and museum representation and is currently completing research on the installment and expansion of liberalism in Canada, those who re-shaped and resisted this project and the intersections of these political developments with visual culture in Atlantic Canada.

Interrogating *Intertidal: Vancouver Art and Artists*

Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen
Antwerp, Belgium
17 December 2005 – 26 February 2006

review by Clint Burnham

Over the past 30 years, the “Vancouver school” has come to represent a brand of theoretically informed, photo-based art that uses the tropes of art history as a method of figuring and representing the urban subject under modernity. And while the term “Vancouver school” is anachronistic to describe work in the sixties and seventies (it was first used, allegedly, by an Italian critic on seeing Roy Arden’s photographs in the late 1980s), not to mention hated by the artists it groups together almost as much as “photo-conceptualism,” it’s as unlikely to go away as other inaccurate labels like British Columbia or, for that matter, Vancouver.

Nonetheless, the lineage goes something like this: in the 1960s Iain and Ingrid Baxter began attracting others around them for their quirky mix of proto-conceptual gestures. At the same time, Roy Kiyooka and Ian Wallace were moving out of painting, and the latter was soon teaching the young Jeff Wall and Rodney Graham at UBC. Flash-forward to the end of the seventies, and Wall produces “Destroyed Room,” his first backlit cibachrome transparency (first shown in the window of the nova gallery); Graham makes his “Illuminated Ravine” performance (1979); and in the eighties Ken Lum is making furniture sculptures and Stan Douglas begins the long road to his video/photography installations.

This much is the genesis of the Gideon Bible that is Vancouver photo-conceptualism: unlikely origins in the midst of hippie art in the sixties, ignored by local powers-that-be as well as the market until the mid-to-late-eighties, and at last a happy, hegemonic “counter-tradition” that survives to this day. And this is also the basis for the recent survey of Vancouver art at МУЖКА, which included work by Vikky Alexander, Roy Arden, Rebecca Belmore, Stan Douglas, Geoffrey Farmer, Rodney Graham, Brian Jungen, Tim Lee, Liz Magor, Scott McFarland, Damian Moppett, Judy Radul, Steven Shearer, Ron Terada, Ian Wallace and Kelly Wood. Practically the only names that would not have appeared in this list five years ago would be Belmore’s and Lee’s. Belmore has recently shot to more prominence locally and internationally since her inclu-

sion in the 2005 Venice Biennale; Lee has apparently, since graduating from the UBC MFA program in 2002, conquered the planet, with dealers in Vancouver, New York and London, and work collected by the MOMA and major Canadian galleries.

But I don’t have a problem with the canonical status of the survey. That’s the job of such exhibitions; to complain would be akin to walking into a casino and crying out “there’s gambling going on!” Besides, the alternative is either earnest shows that contain boring art (there is nothing here that is boring) or all-over-the-place shows that try to be all things to all people. (Vancouver has a habit of such polite PC-ness, including the *Topographies* show at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 1996 and *Vancouver Art and Artists 1935–1983* at the VAG in 1983.



Roy Arden, *d'Elegance*, 2000.
Courtesy: the artist.

This is not to say that the Vancouver canon is monolithic, or that there are not interesting contradictions. Much has been made, for instance, of the generational tension between the hegemonic Vancouver school and the younger artists who arrived in the 1990s (including, here, Farmer, Jungen, Moppett, Shearer, Wood).¹ And the presence of such artists from outside the canon as Alexander, Belmore, Magor and Radul on the one hand, and younger artists hitherto less included in discussions of Vancouver such as Lee and McFarland, on the other, also keeps *Intertidal* from being too neat or hermetic in its aesthetic.

One of the most interesting rooms then, contained garden photographs by Scott McFarland with one of Liz Magor’s tree or log simulacras in the centre. The pairing works as a one-liner: This is art about nature. But there are more levels at work here. McFarland’s photography engages with two sets of paradigms for considering the garden as artifice: labour, and aesthetics. The gardens he shows are almost all magnificent, of the kind you only find on Vancouver’s west side; and usually, the people he shoots in the gardens are their owners, either at work (in downmarket Carharts) or enjoying the garden itself (here the owners come off as

the easy-to-ridicule rich: see “On the Terrace Garden, Joe and Rosalie Segal with Cosmos Altrosanguineus” (2004). But the labour here is interesting, especially in the globalized era of outsourcing. For as much as we hear about the middle classes and the rich paying people to take care of their kids, or walk their dogs, or whatever, what this moral censure ignores is the dialectics of that outsourcing: that is, when the wealthy elect to “do it for themselves.” There is a sort of rich man’s DIY (Martha Stewart, anyone?) that likes “getting your hands dirty” (or at least warming up the glue gun). What this phenomenon — as well as anxiety over it — helps us to understand is that “labour,” or working, itself is not the problem of capitalism: that is to say, there is no essence of certain kinds of work that make them exploitation. What McFarland’s photographs do is dereify labour itself — and particularly the pastoral as site of labour; think of them as primitive accumulation in reverse.

This was (the essence) of my analysis of McFarland’s work (there’s a lot of art history going on as well) until I read Adam Harrison’s recent essay at the Vancouver art website *doppelgangermagazine.com*. There, Harrison argued that McFarland’s pictures of gardens are also — via art his-

torical references to Courbet in particular — about photography themselves. For Harrison, the lab technician or photographer, like the gardener, works with chemicals, trims things back, and displays objects of beauty.

When we add to Harrison’s analysis my remarks on labour, we can see that the photographs of gardens are also allegories for the photographer’s anxiety about his or her own labour: in the age of high-resolution digital colour prints, the notion of photographer as artisan is all-but obsolete: rather like the art school students who take up pinhole cameras.

Where all of this takes an interesting spin is when you throw Magor’s log or stump (“Wrap,” 2003) into the mix. Magor’s simulacra are interesting for both formal and feminist-deconstructive reasons. Formally, she’s interested in that process of copying, in the inauthentic — from her pictures of her hippie days “going native” (“Field Work,” 1989) and Civil War re-enactors (“Civil War portfolio,” 1991) to the sculptures of towels to hide beer in (“Double Cabinet (Blue),” 2001) or backpacks with Kraft Dinner escaping (“KD — the Original,” 2000). I call this a formal concern rather than a political one because I think that that work (much of which was



Stan Douglas, *Every Building on 100 Hastings*, 2003. Courtesy: the artist.

Utopia for whom?: Cautionary thoughts on celebrating the neoliberal city

uTOpia: Towards a New Toronto
edited by Jason McBride and Alana Wilcox
(Toronto: Coach House Books, 2005)

review by Jennefer Laidley and Heather McLean

in a retrospective of her work at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 2002) deals with the formations of subjectivity and of the object, and their relation with each other. Thus the Civil War re-enactor will try to use authentic weapons, and she used real Kraft Dinner powder. There was a case of real beer in her towel sculptures, and she uses real fibreglass or sleeping bags for her tree sculptures ("Burrow," 1999, "Hollow," 1998–99).

But in terms of a feminist-deconstructive politics, things go further afield. This is particularly so for the series of trees I've seen of Magor's, which constitute an attempt to invaginate the phallic. That is, they are first of all deconstructions of the tree as Western symbol (and victim, via logging): from Christianity to Deleuze and Guattari, the tree stands in for God, the father, the monolithic truth. The tree's inversion occurs elsewhere in *Intertidal*: in some of Rodney Graham's photographs, of course, as well as in Steven Shearer's digital collage of inverted Christmas trees (going along with his interest in the Satanic?) and even, obliquely, in Tim Lee's riff on Graham, an upside down self-portrait. But Magor evacuates the tree, like a wood-boring beetle, and reveals the hollowness in the phallus.

What this means in part is that the structure for McFarland's photographs is also suspect. (I'm not talking about some pissing match here, rather about how the works of art relate to each other). For the limits of Wallesque pictorialism is that it depends on the readability of the referentialism; Magor's sculptures do as well, but they also show that the readability is of a void, an emptiness, an absence. In the case of McFarland's pictures, they stage an antinomy between labour done for its

own sake and labour with no purpose: the former is the garden as hobby, the latter is the photograph as commodity. And then for Magor's sculptures, they reconstitute a feminist utopia of the semiotic (Kristeva), an unreadable void that is before or outside the Symbolic. Of course, the sleeping bag or pink fibreglass is fully "readable" in one sense in Magor, but only if we negate the status of the work of art itself.

This negation of the work of art, then, in both McFarland and Magor — and, indeed, in much of the work on display at *Intertidal*, from Rebecca Belmore's anguish-ridden performance for the missing/murdered women of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside to Tim Lee's stop-action video of a baseball hovering over his hand, from Judy Radul's reliance on the tropes of theatre and the pastoral to Geoffrey Farmer's styrofoam and cinderblock hotel/zoo construction — may be the greatest unity or homogeneity of



Rodney Graham, *Linden Ronse*, 1989. Courtesy: the artist.

Vancouver art at this juncture. This negation is only possible, I would argue, because of the tremendous level of activity in the Vancouver scene, a level of activity that may attract the attention of outsiders, but, more importantly, can also presage a possibility of art-making beyond art itself.

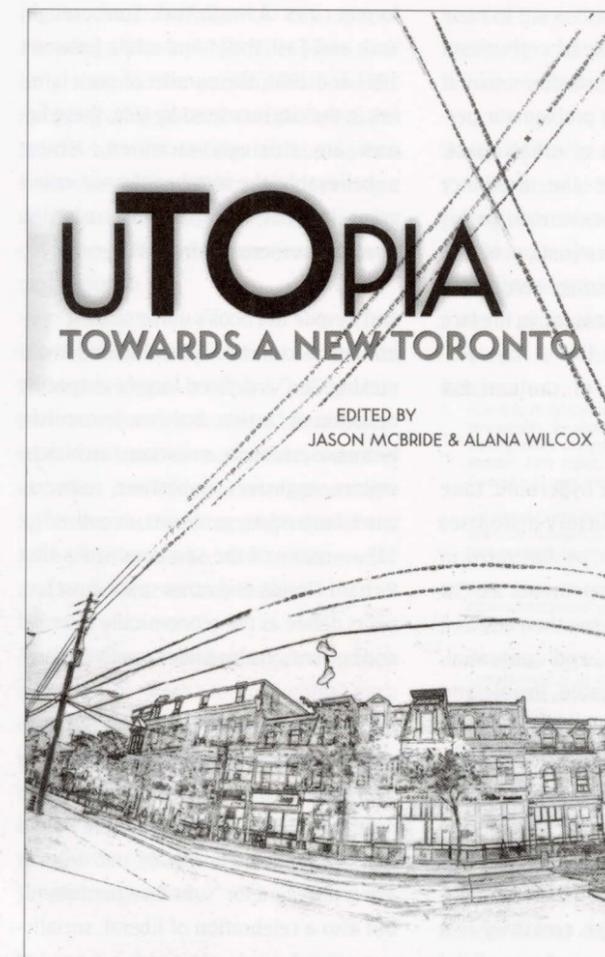
Notes:

1. Ken Lum first broke this ground in a review essay in *Canadian Art* (Summer 1998); Philip Monk's catalogue essay "Bad Seed" traces this divide via a discussion of Jungen, Myfanwy MacLeod, and Moppett (Power Plant, 2002); the generational divide as class conflict formed the basis of my article on the Vancouver scene that appeared in *Flash Art* (Nov–Dec 2004); see also my essay on young Vancouver artist Jeremy Shaw (Presentation House Gallery, forthcoming).

Clint Burnham is a Vancouver writer and critic. His novel Smoke Show was published last year by Arsenal Pulp Press. He writes often on contemporary art, and is a freelance art critic for the Vancouver Sun. Articles and reviews have also appeared recently in C magazine, akimbo.biz, and in poster projects with Derek Sullivan (Toronto) and Sabine Bitter/Helmut Weber (Vancouver/Vienna).

Some quarters of Toronto are currently experiencing what is being called a "cultural renaissance." Four iconic new cultural buildings are being hailed as facets of a civic rebirth, including Will Alsop's \$42 million "slab" at the Ontario College of Art and Design, the Frank Gehry façade at the Art Gallery of Ontario, the \$94 million Libeskind-designed "crystal" at the Royal Ontario Museum, and the wholly new Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts. Humanitas, a new cultural festival linked to the City's "Live With Culture" marketing campaign, makes the links between the arts and urban economic development more explicit while "celebrating Toronto's cultural diversity." Indeed, over the past few years, "the urban" has become a more intensive conceptual space for interlocking networks of musicians, artists and public space advocates who have begun rethinking the role they play in shaping the city's political future, asserting a more prominent place for themselves in debates and generating a heightened level of dialogue between themselves and civic leaders.

Much of the enthusiasm of this moment was captured last fall in *uTOpia*, a collection of thirty-two individually authored chapters (one of which was written by Heather McLean) extolling various aspects of the "wellspring of cultural and ideological activity that has gushed forth from an



infinite diversity of wells" (p.10). The book jacket describes these chapters as "lauding, lambasting and leading the charge for change in Canada's biggest metropolis" and asks its readers, "with both playfulness and pragmatism, to look ahead to Toronto the Could."

The book showcases the many interesting networks and scenes in Toronto, like efforts to promote green roofs and laneway housing in Lorraine Johnson's and Stéphanie Verge's chapters, the indie-music/small-press literati convergence described in Edward Keenan's piece and

affectionate explorations of urban lore in chapters by Philip Evans, Ninjalicious, Dale Duncan and Conan Tobias. These and other chapters are good entry-points for investigating the complexities of urban life, the politics of private and public space, the democratization of community planning processes and the importance of nature in the city.

However, while this wave of enthusiasm for “the urban” seems transformative, it conceals some strikingly problematic perceptions of the politics of urban space. And while we share the hesitancy expressed by Misha Glouberman in his refreshingly critical examination of the politics of pedestrianizing Kensington Market — that “it’s unpleasant, in the face of enthusiasm, to feel like a naysayer” (p.127) — a measure of caution and reflection is required.

Most troubling are the hyperbolic tone and internally contradictory discourses that surround the book, as illustrated in such media release statements as, “At long last, Torontonians see their city as a place of possibility and potential. Visions of a truly workable, livable and world-class city are once again dancing in citizens’ heads.” While clearly a workable and livable city is worth striving for, the overarching rhetoric promoting “world class” status echoes currently ascendant neoliberal urban regeneration programs in which creativity is a marketable commodity and superficial constructions of downtown urban “lifestyles” are celebrated as the primary drivers of economic growth. This vision of “the urban” reserves the benefits of a new urban livability for specific populations, while excluding and disenfranchising many others.

Despite the book’s excitement about the city’s “extraordinary possibility,” the image of a trajectory of urban progress is contradicted by the fact of deepening socioeconomic disparities in Toronto. The United Way’s recent study, *Poverty by Postal Code*, illustrates that poverty is not only worsening, it is also becoming concentrated in the older inner suburbs, the former cities of North York, Scarborough, York and East York.¹ And while between 1981 and 2001, the number of poor families in the city increased by 69%, these figures are strikingly racialized. Almost unbelievably, the number of poor immigrant families living in areas of high poverty has increased by 484%.

And despite the book’s universalizing celebration of “community” and shared myth-making, “us” is defined largely as specific networks of “artists, activists, journalists, historians, students, musicians, architects, writers, engineers, publishers, restaurateurs, bartenders, gardeners, scientists” (p. 11) — many of the same networks that Richard Florida and other space entrepreneurs define as the economically essential and currently fashionable “creative class.”²

In the Floridian vein, the book’s geographic focus is almost exclusively restricted to urbane, exciting, downtown neighbourhoods. And indeed, the book’s fold-out maps demonstrate not only an active disregard for “suburban nerdistan”³ but also a celebration of liberal, socially-engineered and sanitized visions of Toronto’s downtown. Limiting *uTopia* to the increasingly gentrified neighbourhoods of the downtown core actively ignores those neighbourhoods in which a lack of public space and access to transit and amenities fosters more social exclusion, deepening the divide between con-

structions of the privileged downtown “us” and the suburban “them.”

Representations of some of the city’s downtown neighbourhoods in the maps are also troubling. Public housing neighbourhoods are labeled “redevelopment zones” or “mixed income developments” without acknowledging the complexities of the gentrification politics embedded in large-scale public housing re-development and privatization schemes. Atkinson Housing Co-operative — a 410-unit former public housing neighbourhood just south of Kensington Market — is transformed into a newly designated Kensington Park, its residents completely erased. But increasingly unaffordable pedestrian-friendly downtown neighbourhoods, like the Annex or Cabbagetown, are not redesignated “mixed income.” Do only poor residents need the purported benefits of deconcentration? Where is the utopia in which the expansive manicured lawns of Rosedale become “mixed income” neighbourhoods? While the maps do provide playful visions of urban bread ovens, green spaces, wind turbines and bike paths, they also disregard the power dynamics inherent in representations of urban space and fail to demonstrate a comprehensive understanding of spatial justice.

Focusing mainly on mixed-use downtown spaces and “creative class” networks, the book reproduces a class- and race-blind, conflict-free, apolitical politics centering on the supposed enormous transformative potential of culture and creativity. This celebration of creativity risks falling into the trap of a libertarian, atomized politics that valorize individual and creative entrepreneurship as a mode of urban renewal, rather than enjoining the

transformative potential of art from a broader social context in which the complexities of race, class, gender and culture in the city can be explored. Extolling community within a creative class context has the potential to be emptied of any political content, forming an aesthetic rather than political ideal.

While it’s not only fun but politically crucial to dream an urban future in which the problems of the present are rectified and transformed, the transformation extolled in the book has largely been evacuated of redistributive concerns and the politics of social reproduction. And while Mayor David Miller — whose foreword frames the book’s energetic optimism — seems a refreshing change from Mel Lastman’s clownish neo-conservatism, it is simplistic to so unquestioningly align with a municipal administration that continues to aggressively implement neo-liberal, boosterist, competitive city⁴ strategies.

In many ways the individual chapters are greater than the sum of the book. Not all of the chapters fall into the trap of fostering “hipsturbanism,”⁵ and many provide insight into the politics of the heterogeneous fabric of the city and the possibilities found in a range of spaces.

John Lorinc’s piece on strip malls, the everyday spaces of suburbia, reveals the politics of marginal urban spaces that provide not only shops and services for new immigrants but, more importantly, sites from which both social and economic belonging can be built. Chris Hardwicke’s visionary Velo-City, a proposal for a radical network of raised bicycle expressways, reveals the institutional privileging of specific forms of urban infrastructure, and particularly those that threaten our

ecosystems as well as our physical and mental well-being. And Barbara Rahder and Patricia Wood’s chapter points to the possibility of a healthier urban future.

Luis Jacob’s chapter disrupts notions of public and private space, bringing the politics of play to a downtown park and revealing the artistic possibilities inherent in the most average of city spaces. Planning Action’s public toilet piece similarly shatters the public/private divide. Focusing on a space of uncleanness, this article subverts notions of appropriate behaviour in the public realm, opening a whole new avenue of viewing everyday city space, and raising questions of access and inclusion.

Darren O’Donnell’s call for a Toronto Children’s Council is not only a witty addition, but also a challenge to institutionalized structures of power and selective exclusion. And Deanne Taylor’s piece highlights the rhetorical employment of the urban by those who seek to commodify and exploit its everyday realities.

As Mark Kingwell and others note in their chapters, the Greek roots of “utopia” are a contradictory fusion of good place and no place, signaling that a perfect urban future is perhaps by its very nature an impossibility. For any utopia to be built, however, it must be just that — built, rather than simply imagined.

This perhaps requires building alliances with groups that creatively work for justice in both suburban and urban contexts, allowing for their stories to also be told. Such groups include No One Is Illegal, an organization that works for justice for immigrants and refugees, and the Workers’ Action Centre, which organ-

izes great events like the “deadbeat boss bus tour.”⁶

Wading into the material realities of Toronto’s average residents, into the untidy and ordinary realms of income security, labour force precarity, housing affordability, discrimination, environmental injustice — indeed, into the very heart of the politics of urban space — is a necessary and crucial complement to fashioning dreamscapes.

We acknowledge and appreciate the editors’ intention to have *uTopia* be “a way of getting the conversation started.” We hope that this piece and its critique, and the inevitable criticism it will engender, will be a useful addition to this dialogue.

Notes:

1. *Poverty by Postal Code* is available online at www.unitedway-toronto.com. See also the Daily Bread Food Bank’s annual reports, *Who’s Hungry?* www.dailybread.ca and Punam Khosla’s 2004 report, *If Low-Income Women of Colour Counted in Toronto*, www.socialplanningtoronto.org.
2. See Adrian Blackwell, “The gentrification of gentrification and other strategies of Toronto’s creative class” in *FUSE* 29:1 (January 2006), pp. 28–37.
3. Jamie Peck, “Struggling with the creative class” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 29:4 (December 2005), p. 746.
4. Stefan Kipfer and Roger Keil, “Toronto Inc? Planning the Competitive City in the New Toronto in *Antipode* 34:2 (March 2002), pp. 227–264.
5. This term was coined by Planning Action member and geographer Deborah Cowan in conversation with the authors.
6. See www.noii.org and www.workersactioncentre.org.

Jennifer Laidley and Heather McLean study urban issues from a critical perspective at the Faculty of Environmental Studies at York University. Heather McLean’s piece, “Go west young hipster,” appears in uTopia and raises issues of gentrification on Queen Street West and the politics of community involvement in planning processes.

Organizing for Peace

shortFuse by Jamelie Hassan

On 11 August 2006, Arteaste film curator Rasha Salti and anti-war activist Rania Masri circulated an e-mail from Lebanon to alert domestic and international communities of an action that was being planned. A convoy of over 100 vehicles planned to drive down to the south the next day: "To defy the Israeli order that all cars South of the Litani River will be considered legitimate targets (including in and around the city of Tyre) and the forced displacement of one million Lebanese from their homes, the convoy will carry Lebanese citizens, foreigners from all over the world and food, sanitary and medical supplies; all aid to the South has been suspended and tens of thousands of people and many hospitals remain trapped without access to basic necessities."

Israeli-us propaganda exploited the story of the two soldiers captured by Hezbollah to justify the devastation of Lebanon under the familiar mantra of "wiping out terrorists." Throughout the 34-day ordeal, Canadian media fully aligned themselves with this propaganda. When CBC news interviewed an Israeli soldier on the 14 August ceasefire, he smiled and said that he could hear birds chirping again in the morning. I imagine Youssef Rahil, a 15-year-old shepherd in Southern Lebanon could also hear the birds chirping when he was killed by Israeli soldiers on February 1, 2006. This, like many of the stories prior to and during the conflict, never made it into Canadian media.

Contrary to these familiar and predictable patterns of Canadian cultural and media industries, the days of assault on Lebanon saw a constant delivery of images, strategic information, analysis and reflection directly from Lebanon through personal e-mails,

blogs (mazenkerblog.blogspot.com, laureghorayeb.blogspot.com and others), artist and cultural organization websites (electronicintifada.net/v2/article5082.shtml, www.beirutletters.org, www.ashkalalwan.org and others) and independent journalists and online media (raedyassin.blogspot.com, lebanonupdates.blogspot.com, electroniclebanon.net and others). These groups and individuals recorded the magnitude of suffering and destruction as well as the determined and growing activist, cultural and popular resistance to it.

A week before Israel commenced its incursion, a small delegation from Canada's film industry — lead by producer Robert Lantos—travelled to Israel at the expense of the Israel's Consul-General in Toronto, Ya'acov Brosh, to attend the 23rd Annual Jerusalem Film Festival. According to the *Globe and Mail* report, during the eleven-day visit delegates were to socialize with Israeli film personalities, attend screenings, hang out at clubs and restaurants, sightsee, have a private dinner with Israel's Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and meet with the Minister of Tourism. Brosh commented that "Israel has so many other things that we're proud of, in high tech, in industry, science, culture, in food even. I'm happy that we're having, let's call it, a 'normal' delegation ... and normal coverage of a nice and cozy and happy event that we have there."

This coziness overlapped with an intensification of war against Palestinians in Gaza and the start of massive attacks on Lebanon. On his return to Canada, Lantos was at the forefront of "Stand Up for Israel" rallies in Toronto. He, along with other prominent (former) Liberals, Gerry Schwartz and Heather Reisman, tore up his Liberal

membership card, denouncing the party for not taking a stronger position in support of Israel (he had not yet heard leadership hopeful Michael Ignatieff's respond to the Qana massacre with, "This is the kind of dirty war you're in when you have to do this, and I'm not losing sleep about that.") and turning to Harper's Conservatives, where he could find the unconditional support he demanded. Harper had infamously dubbed Israel's systematic bombardment of civilian infrastructure in Lebanon "a measured response."

During the bombardment, Cube Gallery director Don Monet, in collaboration with Ron Benner and myself initiated a call for *Art against War*, inviting artists to participate in an exhibit in support of *Médicins Sans Frontières*. Ours was one of many efforts to directly support front-line aid organizations, create pressure and build awareness about the rights of the people of Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq and Afghanistan.

Tens of thousands of people across Canada took to the streets, held rallies, benefit concerts and solidarity events to demand a halt to the assault on Lebanon. These efforts made explicit our collective opposition to Conservative foreign policies, including Canada's military engagement in Afghanistan, and questioned Harper's sycophantic relationship to the Bush/Cheney regime.

As Lebanese people return to the inevitable clearing of the rubble of their homes and begin the work of rebuilding infrastructure and institutions and Bush sends his warnings to Iran, we see that the urgency to organize for peace has not abated.

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