FUSE MAGAZINE

Volume 18 Number 5 $4.50

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From Studio D of the National Film Board of Canada

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HANDS OF HISTORY

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– *Front* Jan/Feb 1995

A tribute to the role of aboriginal women artists in maintaining the voice of aboriginal culture. Featuring internationally renowned master weaver Rena Point Bolton (Stol:o), carver and button blanket maker Doreen Jensen (Gitskan), painter, printmaker and collage artist Jane Ash Poitras (Chippewan) and mixed-media artist Joane Cardinal-Schubert (Blood).

9194 001 52 minutes $26.95

Director: **Loretta Todd**
Producer: **Margaret Pettigrew**

Keepers of the Fire

"...inspiring and real: reflecting the strength of aboriginal women in a contemporary Canadian context."

– Muriel Stanley Venne, President, Founder, The Institute for Advancement of Aboriginal Women

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9194 085 55 minutes $26.95

Writer and Director: **Christine Welsh**
Producers: **Ian Herring (OMNI), Christine Welsh**
Producers for the NFB: **Signe Johansson, Joe MacDonald**

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Tales of Wonder

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– Sunera Thobani, President, NAC

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9194 087 90 minutes $34.95

Director: **Helene Klodawsky**
Associate Director and Editor: **Sidonie Kerr**
Producer: **Signe Johansson**

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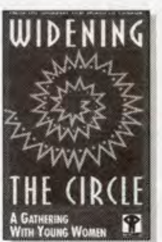
A GATHERING WITH YOUNG WOMEN



A three-part video featuring moments from a 1992 conference, at which young women discussed some of the issues important in their lives: self-esteem, racism, education, feminism, and sexism. An important discussion starter for young women and men interested in how the world shapes them and makes them who they are.

9194 112 25 minutes $26.95

Production Team: **Danielle Dyson, Cheryl Sim, Barbara Hutchinson, Patricia Diaz, Annette Clarke, Nicole Hubert.**

Produced by Studio D of the NFB with the participation of the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women and with financial assistance from the Status of Disabled Persons Secretariat.

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CENTRE DE DOCUMENTATION
ARTEXTE
DOCUMENTATION CENTRE

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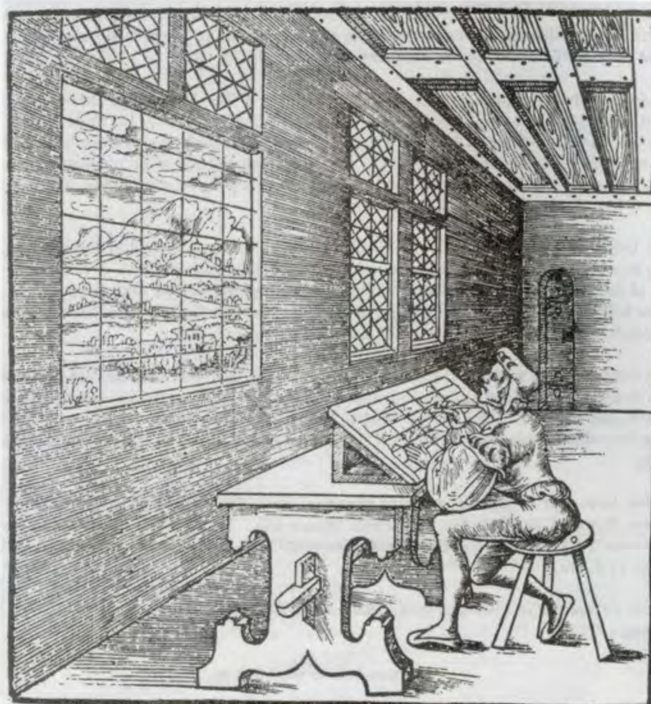

Cover image: Group of Laocoön and his sons, reconstructed by Filippo Magi; Vatican.

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Editorial

A recent ad for the Art Gallery of Ontario in *The Globe and Mail* asked the following question: "Barbara Hepworth: Feminist or Formalist?" Such a demand illustrates precisely the division between politics and aesthetics promulgated in the mainstream media and art world. The separation is premised on the view that art is *either* formal or social; that an artwork either reflects its maker's racial, sexual or class identity or rises above it; and that the art world proper is a mix of careers and personalities, art auction prices, block-buster shows and gossip about curators, all shored up by the myth of the marginal, needlessly "obscure" artist. The art world is thus a monolith easily "set ablaze by new auction house prices," as one AP wire recently blared, and equally enraged by those who challenge the timelessness of its aesthetics with bad art, "victim" art, dirty art, indignant art.

We would like to suggest that it is possible to talk about art in ways that take into account the formal qualities of the work *and* the social determinants of that formalism; that the identity of an artist is not reducible to her biography (as either personality profile or identity politics), but that it cannot be separated from those shaping forces; that the discussion of art can be attuned to contemporary and philosophical discourses *and* aware of the specifics and histories of the media and traditions within which the artist is working; and finally, that the very definition of art is a changing and fluid one. Its categories and meanings are not carved in stone but continually challenged and remade by all the discourses that some would banish to the exteriority of art.

To that end, we're all very excited by what we've managed to gather for an issue focusing on the politics of visual aesthetics in its varying forms—hence art *and* activism, art *and* community, art *and* identity, art *and* public, art *and* race, art *and* sexuality, art *and* technology, art *and* theory. David McIntosh's incisive and thorough-ranging article on the video art of Michael Balser draws startling connections between gay porn, AIDS activism and the postmodern notion of cyber-identity. Robert Labossière's article on arts funding issues a clarion call for a redefinition of the notion of community and political representation at a time when arts funding is (again) under scrutiny by a hostile right. Robert W.G. Lee traces the links between AIDS activism and art in Montreal. Ann Shin's profile of Lee Bul is an engaging look at a performance artist who locates the body on a east/west axis of identity. Sandra Haar explores the social and political implications of relationships in Toronto's third annual Jewish Film Festival. Our summer reading review supplement surveys some recent developments between, as one review succinctly puts it, art, theory and activism. There's much more and we hope you enjoy!

—eds.

Film and Video News

by Karen Tisch

Festival Flurry

It's spring and for lovers of independent film and video that means heavy festival action, and an array of treats to sample.

In late April Northern Visions mounted its eighth annual Images Festival of Independent Film and Video, presenting over 120 documentary, dramatic and experimental productions. Highlights included *The Outer Limits*, a three-part spotlight on the work of Mike Hoolboom (curated by Geoff Pevere); *Celebrating Toronto*, a showcase of world premieres by local artists; and *Rituals for Future Bodies: Science Fictions / Fictions of Science*, a full-day presentation on women and technology. The newly established NFB New Screen Award was presented to Margaret Stratton for her video, *Kiss the Boys and Make Them Cry*. Honourable mention went to Janine Fung, Joane Cardinal Schubert and Nelson Henricks.

Still from *Modern Times*, Mike Hoolbloom, 16mm, 1991, 4 min. Distributor: CFMDC, Toronto.

In early May the festivities continued with Desh Pardesh's fourth annual celebration of art and politics of the South Asian Diaspora. Featuring visual art, writing, performance art, music and dance as well as a prominent media arts component, the festival presented several film and video premieres, including Vivek Bald's multi-layered *Taxi/vala Auto/biography; Memsahib Rita*, British director Pratibha Parmar's long-anticipated foray into dramatic film production; and Anne-Marie Sweeny's probing documentary, *Women of Downing Street*.

Still from *Kiss the Boys and Make Them Cry*, Margaret Stratton, video, 1994, 30 min. Distributor: Video Data Bank, Chicago.

The voices and visions of Asian women continued to grace Toronto screens throughout May as the Asian Heritage Month Group mounted its second annual interdisciplinary arts festival. *Laundry Women, Dragon Ladies and Other Exotic Oriental Girls* (curated by Paul Lee) brought together a diverse body of films and videos by and featuring Asian women. *Defying Categories* (curated by Kass Banning) spotlighted local filmmaker Midi Onodera, with screenings of some of her rarely seen experimental works, her documentary, *The Displaced View*, and a sneak preview of her long-awaited dramatic feature, *Skin Deep*.

Halfway through May the weather changed but the festival flurry continued with the Inside/Out Collective's fifth annual Lesbian and Gay Film and Video Festival. Over the course of two weeks, the festival presented approximately 180 productions—ranging from Steve Reinke's two-minute video, *Jin's Dream*, whose narrator lands a job selecting images of male nudes for erotic playing cards, to Marlon Riggs's final work, *Black Is... Black Ain't*, a feature-length exploration of African American identity. With three venues, twenty-seven programmes and a new award for the most popular Canadian work, the Inside/Out Festival has asserted itself as one of the largest and most vibrant events of its kind.

Shrinking Funds

Of interest (and perhaps dire concern) to emerging film and video makers in Canada are the recent structural changes to the Arts Division of the Canada Council. According to a May press release, the Canada Council has reduced the number of arts sections from ten to seven, eliminating the Explorations Programme. Created to "address the needs of new and emerging artists, arts groups and art forms," Explorations has provided invaluable support to first-time film and videomakers. The Canada Council has promised to hire a development coordinator who will promote increased access to Council programmes and create development strategies within the individual sections, but for budding media artists Explorations will be sorely missed.

As a result of further financial cuts to government agencies, the National Film Board of Canada has eliminated the programming budget previously allocated to the John Spotton Cinema. While the Spotton will continue to operate as a venue for National Film Board screenings and as a rental facility, it will no longer provide in-house or independent programming opportunities. In the hands of programmer Marc Glassman, theatre manager Robin Smith and tech whiz Hans Burgschmidt, it had become a leading Toronto venue for cutting-edge independent production.

Celebrating Canadian Cinema

Every so often, a Canadian film bursts upon the international scene like a lone shooting star, momentarily lighting up the sky before being sucked into the cinematic black hole. In the past year, Canadian first-time feature filmmakers have created a virtual meteor shower. Congratulations are due to Vancouverite Mina Shum, whose film *Double Happiness* took home the Berlin International Film Festival's Wolfgang Staudte prize for best first feature; to Ali Kazimi, whose documentary feature *Narmada: A Valley Rises*, garnered him a Golden Gate Award at the San Francisco International Film Festival; and to Toronto filmmakers Clement Virgo and Stephen Williams, whose extraordinary debut films, *Rude* and *Soul Survivor*, received prestigious placement at the Cannes Film Festival this spring. With first features like this, there's no telling where these artists will go next.

Reports from the Front Line: FUSE Goes Back to School

Some Thoughts on Life Recently Out of School

by J.J. Lee

Imperial Academy of Art, St. Petersburg.

In this and coming issues, FUSE will provide a forum for discussion of theory and practice in art schools. We hope that reports from students and recent graduates on the relationship between their studies, the theory they are being taught and are reading and their practices as artists, will illuminate current and future directions in art practice. Our specific interests are in how the social dimensions of art are being framed, interpreted and assimilated at the moment when the artist begins the process of mapping out the dimensions of his or her project: in school.

—eds.

During the '70s the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design experienced its height as a progressive conceptual art centre. Joseph Beuys and Vito Acconci walked the halls as demi-gods of the new ways of thinking. It was a time when object-making was discarded in favour of thought-making. Time passes, however, as do theories. When I attended the college (1987–92), the presence of its conceptual hey-day was still a prevalent undercurrent. Today, like many institutions, it struggles to locate itself within art theory and practice. What are the issues at hand now? How does this affect the aesthetics of art being produced today? How can an institution, famous for establishing the grounds that determine much contemporary art practice, maintain balance between remaining current and retaining its crowning glory?

During my school years—and through all of art history since the invention of the camera—painting has maintained a precarious position as a valid art form. Although the painting department was ruled by conceptual heavyweights such as Gerald Ferguson and Garry Kennedy, the general overtone of the instruction focused on the *craft* of paint. The result was (fortunately, I think) a highly skilled group of painters. The postmodernist/ modernist conceptual division was, however, the main construct through which painting was viewed. Having only studied painting, drawing and art history, my relationship to the college was characterized by a wrestling of a Greenbergian formalism with current discourses. Also, within the sculpture and painting divisions, a "boy's club" mentality prevailed, despite a sizable enrollment of female students. At the time—at least in the painting department—there seemed to be no room for the exploration of identity politics within all of this. It was paint for paint's sake with borrowed images sprinkled in. The other departments of the college emphasized the opposite; they offered feminist politics and conceptualist ideas. Yet perhaps with the redefinition of NSCAD's position, there is now a greater allowance in the painting department for this kind of discourse, reflecting the current re-establishment and acceptance of painting worldwide.

Being in an art school is a safe haven because it is a community that doesn't question the validity of making art. In school you are not asked if you are an impressionist or if you paint portraits, still life or that "modern stuff." However, the extensive support and encouragement you receive in school suddenly vanishes once you're handed your piece of paper. I now see amongst my artist friends a mass enema taking place; there is a desire to disgorge all of that theory we digested in school. We have attempted to shed those voices in our heads from former instructors who asked: "What is the function of that drip in the lower left hand corner? How does it represent an ideology?" Students and graduates now seem to want to shake off the weight of theory and politics, and turn instead to a more spontaneous and immediate manner of making art. Because of stiffer competition with more established artists for exhibition space, the response of emerging artists is to turn toward community and activist art-making and to take our work to alternative venues. This has resulted in an increased number of shows in abandoned warehouses, on billboards and bus shelters. It is ironic that parallel galleries are becoming the opposite of what their original mandates set out to challenge. For artists, it is a question of trying to maintain a balance of all that we were fed with a firm grounding of an aesthetic presence. For what else can we do? Is this the predictable response after being out of the womb for a few years?

With the changing demographics of art students toward a higher percentage of "persons of colour," lesbians and gay men and women, it has naturally affected the urgency to deal with certain topics which previously have been suppressed in critical theory. We have now begun to create a platform from which to voice our concerns through art, as did feminists decades ago. Under the deceiving label of "multiculturalism," non-white artists are at risk of being patronized by funding agencies as a way to placate discontented voices. It places us in the difficult position of not knowing whether to take advantage of, say, an exhibition that specifically calls for "minority" artists, or to refuse to participate in such a way that would further marginalize us. With an increasing number of individual artists who are only now beginning to feel comfortable in expressing those concerns, we must reassess our relationship within our own traditionally marginalized groups. We question how to *maintain* a unique voice when the art world is beginning to tire of hearing us bitch and complain, and the larger world where there is a backlash against "political correctness."

Although I graduated only three years ago, I already feel that there is a generation gap between my graduating class and the students now. There seems to be a phenomenon of Generation X art students: they are careerist and hyper-conscious of finding jobs within this age of recession. For an artist, that means knowing Baudrillard like the back of your hand and you can't not know Lacan. Your work must be highly reproducible so it will look good in *Art in America*. It may very well be the same seasonal quick-change that fashion goes through. As fashion magazines induce the labour of a new look, so do art schools.

It may not help that the first question from former art school instructors is: "Are you still making work?" It's a test to see if you (as one is reminded over and over again) fit into the small percentage of art school graduates who continue to make art in this supposedly tough, cruel, competitive world of art. The response to the correct answer is "Good for you!"

J.J. Lee received a BFA from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in 1992, and recently participated in two residencies at the Banff Centre for the Arts. She currently lives in Vancouver where she works at the Vancouver Art Gallery and is still painting.

Je Me Souviens

Positive (Inter)Actions: Responding to AIDS in Montreal

by Robert W.G. Lee

One of the things that struck me when I moved to Montreal in 1993 was the conspicuous absence of safer sex posters and pamphlets and other tangible markers of a consciousness about AIDS, particularly in the gay village. These materials were commonplace at the lone gay bar in my home town of Saskatoon, and it was puzzling that such information was so scarce in Montreal. I came to realize, however, that this absence was symptomatic of a climate of apathy and denial that has marked much of Montreal's response to the epidemic.

Montreal is not without its own history of AIDS activism, which has included the work of artistic communities. SIDART, the cultural component to the 5th International AIDS Conference in Montreal (1989), featured a dynamic programme of art exhibitions, screenings and performances addressing AIDS. Organizer Ken Morrison later teamed up with Alan Klusacek to compile *A Leap In the Dark: AIDS, Art and Contemporary Cultures* (1992), a major Canadian publication on AIDS and cultural production. In 1992, Klusacek went on to organize Re-Voir le SIDA, a series of events including the British exhibition "Ecstatic Antibodies," and the exhibition "Apprentissages," featuring several Montreal artists.

These cultural events were significant in Montreal, and Canada for that matter, for confronting the discrimination, fear and denial that has marked much of the epidemic. Moreover, they demonstrated that aesthetic activism in the context of the gallery or museum exhibition defines one of the many ways of intervention and action in responding to the epidemic.

Montreal has tended to respond to AIDS through isolated events such as these. A lack of government funding has made attempts at a united and sustained effort difficult. This has resulted in a number of splinter AIDS organizations that have sprung up in Montreal to serve the needs of very specific communities. Activism as of late has been largely limited to annual fundraisers such as the AIDS walkathon, Ça Marche, and the Black and Blue Party, none of which have directly involved artistic communities. Other than these few high-profile events, the epidemic has been met with silence. This became particularly obvious on December 1, 1993, when World AIDS Day and A Day Without Art were noticeably lacking in activities.

The following January, a number of graduate students from Concordia got together to plan what we could do to bring attention to AIDS in Montreal. The previous Day Without Art seemed more like a day without activism, so we decided that as art historians, curators and artists we would focus our efforts on that day.

Our intentions were originally quite ambitious. Proposed projects included everything from art exhibitions and poster campaigns to video screenings and creative condom packaging. Over the following months, our plans evolved as did our membership, which eventually stabilized around a core of about six people. We decided that we would work best as a curatorial collective. By the fall of 1994, working under the name of Positive Action (+ACTION+), we had secured a gallery space for our first exhibition entitled "Student Responses to AIDS."

The VAV Gallery in the visual arts building at Concordia was a logical exhibition site for several reasons: most of the people involved in the project were Concordia students; this academic year Concordia offered one of the few interdisciplinary HIV/AIDS courses taught in North America; and finally we wanted the exhibition not only to provide other students with an opportunity to voice their concerns about AIDS but also to complement the AIDS course in a concrete way.

Following the virtual silence that marked World AIDS Day the previous year in Montreal, we decided there was no better time than the present for an exhibition. "Student Responses to AIDS" (November 28–December 3, 1993), not only marked World AIDS Day and Day Without Art, but also brought artists and various other communities together in a productive way. We intended the exhibition to figure as one of the many collective voices of artistic communities across Canada and around the world calling for action and intervention in the pandemic. We also hoped that such an exhibition would act as a further point of discussion around the realities of AIDS in Montreal, as well as expand the potential for

Gay Pride Parade, New York City, 1992. Photo: Vincent Dilio.

Detail of *Drawing Blood*, Glen Gear, photograph, cotton cord, 1994. Photo: Robert W.G. Lee

activism and concrete action in the art world.

As part of the exhibition we included a book of artist statements that viewers could read if they so chose, a comment book that gave an opportunity for viewer response, a curatorial statement and pamphlets about safer sex that included a playful safer sex cartoon in English and French and free condoms for people to take.

The issues tackled by each of the eleven artists in the exhibition were quite different, as were the techniques and approaches. Many of the works dealt with issues surrounding safer sex, touching on notions of intimacy, transmission routes, personal and collective involvement. Other works, by Joel Skogman, Kevin Taylor and Carol Cliff, spoke to issues of community, scientific and medical discourses around AIDS, framing the more personal pieces in a larger social and political context.

Photographer Vince Dilio contributed four black and white photographs taken at Gay Pride festivals in New York and Montreal. One of these photos portrayed a group of people from ACT UP with t-shirts and placards reading SILENCE = DEATH. The other photographs dealt in various ways with issues of gay and lesbian communities. Dilio's work, in depicting community response and collective involvement, made visible Simon Watney's claims about the value of community solidarity in the context of discussions of AIDS/HIV education and prevention.[1] We placed Dilio's work close to the entrance of the show to offer a political frame through which to view the exhibition.

Laura Killam's piece, a doll made from latex condoms entitled *Hold Me*, added to the discussion about personal involvement in risk-reduction practices. Killam's statement spoke eloquently about intimacy and safer sex, and the difficulty that is sometimes felt in reconciling them. The metaphor of latex as a skin, a third skin, coming between two people was virtually present in the small figurative sculpture. In making latex a part of one's sex life, Killam asks: "When will it begin to feel like your own skin?" The scale of the doll established an intimacy with the viewer who was encouraged by a sign to gently touch the tactile latex surface. The notion of condoms as foreign and uncomfortable is one that the doll, a non-threatening and familiar object even to children, was meant to overcome.

Glenn Gear's *Drawing Blood* used a photograph mounted on the wall behind a red rope that extended from the ceiling to a pile coiled on the floor. The black and white photograph pictured a pair of hands being washed, with water flowing over them. A text panel within the frame read: "The threat of quarantine has always been present." Gear's piece confronts the vindictive connotations of "guilt" and "risk groups" that have been associated, in media representations, with AIDS. Gear's reference to the notion of quarantine points to the way identity and sexuality have been conflated with disease in the context of AIDS. This has been as damaging to those involved in the fight against AIDS as it has to the people who imagine themselves as removed from the epidemic and not at risk. "Drawing Blood" spoke as much about AIDS-phobia and hysteria as about where one chooses to locate oneself in the AIDS crisis.

Angela Dorrer's *Condom-Object* proved to be one of the most interesting pieces in the exhibition. Hanging off the wall from one small metal hoop, Dorrer's piece consisted of a number of interconnected condoms filled with water. The end of one was placed into the opening of the next, producing a long phallic shape. The uppermost condom contained red fluid that slowly transferred its way down from the top to the bottom via small pin holes that the artist made in the tip of each condom. Resembling an IV bottle, the sculpture spoke metaphorically about transmission routes and the escalating rate of infection. On a very intuitive level, the piece was able to capture a sense of helplessness felt both by individuals and communities in the face of an epidemic that has been marked with contradictory information, blatant discrimination, rising infection rates and agonizing personal loss.

Pleased with the first Positive Action exhibition, we embarked on a second project less than two months later. We contacted University of Western Ontario professor James Miller, editor of *Fluid Exchanges: Artists and Critics in the AIDS Crisis* and organizer of the travelling exhibition of international AIDS posters "Visual AIDS," to ask him to come to Montreal to speak at Concordia. Miller not only agreed but also proposed that we mount a version of "Visual AIDS" in Montreal.

The collection that comprises "Visual AIDS" now numbers well over a thousand posters. Begun in 1988 by Miller as part of the course on AIDS and culture he taught at the University of Western Ontario, the collection has toured across Canada and internationally. "Visual AIDS" is an important visual resource for those working in the area of AIDS education and prevention, and provides a glimpse into the various strategies employed around the world to raise public understanding of the epidemic.

The thought of bringing in an exhibition of AIDS posters from around the world was an exciting one, given the lack of visible information about AIDS in Montreal. The challenge for us was twofold: finding exhibition space in less than two months, and deciding upon a site that would be highly visible and accessible to people. We liked the idea of having a street exhibition in store windows but getting downtown businesses involved proved to be more difficult than we anticipated.

We approached some businesses that had been involved in projects like this before, most notably Ogilvy's department store. Although Ogilvy's had displayed panels from the AIDS Quilt in their windows in 1989 as part of SIDART, it was hesitant to allow AIDS posters in their windows this time. Ogilvy's did however donate the use of Tudor Hall, a large ballroom in their building, for an exhibition of the posters.

For the street component of the exhibition, we concentrated our efforts on downtown locations where there was plenty of pedestrian traffic. The Tudor Hall exhibition of over 150 posters from the "Visual AIDS" collection ran from January 19–29, 1995. Four businesses, including Aldo shoes, the Gap, Benetton and the Body Shop, participated in the street exhibition. From January 30–February 13, part two of the "Visual AIDS" display took place in two gay establishments, in the windows of L'Androgyne bookstore, and inside SKY pub, a favourite local club.

The difficulty we experienced in receiving the cooperation of some businesses for the display of posters in their windows made the street exhibition smaller in scale than was originally hoped. The question of which language appeared on the posters was a major concern for the businesses that did participate in the project. Given the language debates about public signs in the province of Quebec, many of the stores wanted only French or at least bilingual posters, despite the fact that the "Visual AIDS" collection is international in scope, with many different languages.

Despite the difficulties, it was good to see the posters in and around the city. It seemed fitting that the final display of the posters ended at a gay establishment. In one year, our project of making AIDS/HIV educational and preventative information a little more visible had come full circle.

Since my arrival in Montreal, I have noticed a greater visible effort on the part of some groups to make safer sex information more available. Most notable are the posters, packaged condoms and safer sex comic strip-like pamphlets produced and distributed by the organization Séro Zéro. The strength of these efforts lie in their use of localized strategies that are appealing to their target audiences.

An awareness of and attention to the specifics of target communities is perhaps one of the most important considerations of AIDS education and prevention. There are many ways in which localized and community specific information and discussion can take place. It is important to recognize the exhibition is one such site, providing a forum for community response and reflection, an arena for discussion, and the potential for intervention and action in the AIDS crisis.

NOTES

1. Simon Watney, *Practices of Freedom: Selected Writings on HIV/AIDS* (Duram: Duke University Press, 1994), p. 132.

I would like to thank Rhonda Meier and Anne Whitelaw for their constructive feedback, and Janelle Mellamphy, James Miller, Alice Jim, Kevin Taylor, Margot Bouman, Anne Armstrong, Vlad Cohen and Katie Bethune-Leamen for their positive action.

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Pika-don, the colloquial term for the A-bomb in Japanese, translates as 'flash-boom'. Those closest to the epicentre might/have referred to it consisely as 'pika', having heard no sound; while those on the outskirts of the city might/have called it 'don'. Pika-don-don. For some. Pika flashed an indelible shadow. Don, an echo.

A half-century later, Hiroshima-Nagasaki are scattered with traces of Pika-don. Don. Shadows adjacent to signposts called 'memory'. (Amidst the traffick of 'mazda', 'honda', 'mitsubishi'...) These shadows, palpible. Elusive. They pass. Get passed on.

Fifty years later, I took a polaroid with me on a walk, to catch passing shadows bustling into my everyday. As dusk fell, these shadows spilt into puddles at my feet.

3:04pm Bloor and Spadina

6:12pm Bloor and Bathurst

5:45pm Bloor St. near Brunswick

5:12pm Bloor St. by Palmerston

5:52pm Bloor St. and Albany

4:58pm Bloor St. near Manning

A Newer Laocoön:

Toward a Defence of Artists' Self-determination Through Public Arts Funding[1]

by Robert Labossière

I.

In the past four years the neo-conservative attack on public arts funding has done extensive damage. The merit of particular art has been questioned, aspersions have been cast upon the way in which funding decisions are made and public confidence in the concept of government programmes to foster the arts has eroded. In the ideological confusion, the way has been paved for systematic reductions in public administration, programmes and actual funds to support Canadian artists. Of particular concern are proposed cuts to the administrative budget of the Canada Council and to the Arts Service Organizations programme. We are being told that these are cuts to areas "necessary but where they will do the least harm." But these are cuts to the very structure of the Council, sites where political change is most likely to be manifested and to where change affects the empowerment of artists.

The arts community has had difficulty defending itself against even the most obviously ill-thought-out, bombastic, transparently political attacks. This is partly because it is difficult to explain art in non-specialized terms and partly because the rationale for public funding is equally complex and difficult to explain. Additionally, artists are so poorly represented politically that even if explanations were easy to effect, there is virtually no one to voice them, no path for them to follow.

All three issues, the specialized discourse of art, the complexity of the rationale for public funding and artist's political under-representation, are closely bound together. In this essay I hope to examine the connection between them with a particular focus on the problem of the legitimation of public arts funding and its connection to issues of political representation. I believe the current crisis in funding is not, as presented, a deficit problem but a crisis in legitimation, and that if it is possible to work through the crisis effectively it will be necessary to do so in ideological and political—and not economic—terms.

II.

Perhaps the most thorough analysis of the legitimation crisis within public arts funding is Grant Kester's study of the National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) in the U.S.[2] There he finds deeply entrenched notions of elitism, patronage and professionalism. The NEA was established in 1965 after fifteen years of lobbying. Early on it was argued that it would be consistent with America's cultural and economic role in the world that it would demonstrate an advanced attitude toward culture. It was also argued that a state agency funding the arts would demonstrate a cultural might consistent with America's Cold War posture of global watchdog. When founded, it was believed that the NEA would be an effective vehicle for the international dissemination of American culture.[3]

By the 1970s, the NEA began to be rationalized more as a mechanism for the state to curry favour with disaffected communities. Although this strategy had sometimes backfired in other public programmes where the government became a target of lobby groups spawned by the government's own investment, it seemed to work in the arts. NEA funding ballooned from $11 million in 1969 to $114 million in 1977, and a lot of radical energies—that might have otherwise organized—flowed through the arts, particularly in alternative artists' spaces.[4]

With the expansion of the NEA budget came new programmes and, in the visual arts, collectives, artist-run centres and representative service organizations. Through the late '70s and '80s these organizations became increasingly savvy. Kester finds that these organizations produced professional managers who share many of the characteristics of a more general, Professional Managerial Class (PMC)[5]: a desire for autonomous professional status, a belief in an ethical mission, a particular symbolic and analytic discourse, and a relationship to a constituency identified as needing the profession's assistance. This had great bearing on the NEA and the legitimation of public funding as artists' special training and expertise were increasingly used to justify the expenditure of public funds. Artists, for their part, accepted this rationale in the hope that it might protect them from the vicissitudes of the marketplace in the same way that professional status seemed to protect other professionals.[6]

But in Kester's view, professionalism has not served artists well. The autonomy that professionalism promises will protect artists comes at the cost of a sustained distance from both public funding bodies and the artists' audience or constituents. This distance presents a major obstacle to the legitimate defence of public arts funding. For Kester, artists remain disconnected from the very social constituencies that would prove their relevance:

> this very autonomy has prevented artists and arts administrators from developing and administering models of cultural production in which the needs of the public are taken seriously.... [T]he belief that it is the particular job of the contemporary artist to act as the conscience of society has become a commonplace in current debates over the function of the arts.... [T]he artist's relationship to these publics remains one of moral censure, shamanistic arrogance, or pedagogical superiority.[7]

This is no less true of controversial art, which Kester finds unconvincing in its claims to cultural criticism. The art of Andres Serrano, Barbara Kruger or even Martha Rosler is, for Kester, rooted in notions of artistic freedom as defined and protected by public funding agencies. It remains alienated from the communities it professes to serve, condemned to engage no more than symbolically with issues affecting those communities.

Kester concludes that public arts funding will become legitimate only if artists connect on a more practical level with particular audiences or communities.

III

There is another side to the professionalization problem Kester raises. Artists are not only distanced from the public, they are also distanced from the public funding agencies that support them. Clive Robertson has observed two different approaches to this more internal critique of public arts funding. On the one hand, Robertson finds those who look at arts funding positively; they are conciliatory, argue efficiency and harmony and appeal for increased public understanding of the arts. They downplay the traditional privileges of artists and the problems avant-garde or critical art presents to the average voter and taxpayer. Artists may be professionals or small businesses participating in a kind of "free trade" in cultural goods with few fixed regulations.

Artists are so poorly represented politically that even if explanations were easy to effect, there is virtually no one to voice them, no path for them to follow.

On the other hand, Robertson identifies those who claim a fair share of the finite resources available. They bid for a revised definition of public arts funding, one which, by inference, would deliver a share of political power:

> Whether an arts agency can award grants by peer decision in a success ratio of one in ten or an artist-run centre can engage an artist exhibition or project based upon a success ratio of one in twenty is acceptable only if there are no other commonly agreed to models that would allow a more *equitable access or sharing of the fixed resources.*
>
> Institutions that allow *inclusion* rather than *participation* and define themselves by *principles* instead of *policies* do so arguing that such a liberal strategy is the best defence against conservative attacks. This may be true in the short term but such principles that theoretically separate the excellent from the mediocre additionally prohibit any autonomous gains for individual artists or their collectives. And such principles are administered by those who themselves are contractually protected as public employees or professional managers.[8] [emphases added]

If artists' are helpless to resist cuts to Canada Council funding this is, in no small part, because artists have historically been defined as "included" clients rather than as "participating" stakeholders. By "autonomy," Robertson refers not to Kester's professional autonomy, but means independent political representation. Without the legitimacy of the stakeholder, artists are not politically entitled; they have no right to public support and no political voice. They appear, rather, to be beneficiaries of a government largesse that, even if it is merited, may not be affordable, and professional arts managers, detached from their "clients," have difficulty marshaling even symbolic speech to resist this economic argument.

Today, the government is far from heeding Robertson's call for a participatory democratic model of public arts funding. It is far more intent on re-entrenching liberal "inclusiveness," itself pitched unexpectedly into crisis. The Council's decision to cut support for arts service organizations (ASOs) is particularly indicative. ASOs shift power away from a centralized public administration by moving "symbolic and analytic discourse"[9] to alternative sites. This re-situation of discourse has, in the past two years, made political rather than merely symbolic speech possible for artists. At ANNPAC/RACA (now ARN) and the Writer's Union, for example, First Nations artists and artists of colour, after several years of punishingly slow progress with the larger member groups, established their own agendas and convened their own exclusive meetings. They achieved a degree of autonomy inconceivable within a centralized public administration such as the Canada Council, where "inclusion" precludes the cultivation of overt strategies of political resistance intended to produce real changes to the status quo.[10]

Bearing in mind Kester's critical observation that during the '70s American state funding in certain sectors spawned oppositional activity despite the state's hope to curry favour, it is clear that the situation with the ASOs has historical precedent,[11] which makes the Canada Council's attempt to back away from its commitment to ASOs now so much more startling. How they are backing away is also noteworthy. Deficit reduction provides an easy rationale but, more importantly, rejects the terms of the decentred political discourse developed offsite by the ASOs, making the prospects of discovering deeper levels of legitimation even more dismal.

IV

At this point it may be useful to ask: what would be the major terms of a legitimizing discourse, and where that discourse would be most fruitfully situated?

The search for terms is important, for as Kester notes, there is a connection between legitimation and symbolic speech: "the value of art for the state is always related to art's capacity to generate or enable certain forms of symbolic speech on the part of legislators and politicians."[12] For Kester, the most effective symbolic speech would be one that refers to the communities that artists work for and which support them, the language of "constituents" being never lost on politicians. Kester is not alone in his belief in the importance of community but his view of the term is overly narrow.

Jeffrey Black has canvassed various authors on "community," showing just how complex and unstable the term can be: individuals move in and out of various communities, including family, friends, co-workers, political parties and professional associations (Bhabha); communities are inherently exclusionary and therefore may be taken to be complementary in relation to other repressive social, economic or political structures (Young); communities form in resistance to power, which gives them a reason to act cohesively (Nancy); communities must achieve relevance to others beyond their own group if they are to survive (Onifrijchuk); artists are a professional community with often only symbolic ties which are made even more fragile by the fact that the tie between artists and society itself is so tenuous (Zolberg) (also Kester, above); and the art institutions creating an imaginary community of artists should be destroyed because professionalization of artists contributes to the alienation of individuals from their creativity (Suchin).[13]

For Black, opposition and resistance are aspects of the process of community formation; as communities define themselves, they flex with the tensions between them and that bears implications for civil society generally. Communities do not exist in isolation but name themselves and are named in each other's discourses. Thus community must be seen as not merely a term in a legitimizing discourse, as Kester seems to suggest, but also as a site, or sites, in which discourse develops.

Certainly this has been the experience in Canadian artists' organizations, each of which demonstrate many of the complex characteristics of community, being: easily compared to families, political parties or professional associations; accused of exclusivity; formed in opposition to other groups; and obtaining a relevance beyond their own circle. Organizations such as the Writers' Union have flexed with tensions in recent years and the shock waves affected much more than that organization's membership and programmes.[14]

The autonomy that professionalism promises will protect artists, comes at the cost of a sustained distance from both public funding bodies and the artists' audience or constituents.

Kester is unwilling to acknowledge the extent to which "the arts" are comprised of diverse communities of interest, each being a political constituent with legitimate claims to a share of government resources. He takes too narrow a view of community, alluding to neighbourhoods, factories, immigrant communities and the like, and blames artists for not forging links with them. No doubt such links would be fruitful in convincing the wider public and politicians of the importance of artistic work, lending further depth and complexity to the layers of community already actively represented by artists. But whether or not such links are forged does not negate the fact that the arts community, or rather communities, have already developed forms of political speech that are legitimate with respect to specific communities of interest. What is lacking is not, as Kester suggests, a link between artists and a broader and more average American constituency but a way to convert what, as Kester rightly observes, is still largely symbolic speech, into a more effective political voice.

V

There are many different types and layers of discourse within the arts, none being more interesting, perhaps, than the discourse of difference itself. Discourse itself is a form of social action,[15] but for discourse to translate from the symbolic to the political requires more than a change of syntax or vocabulary. Rather, the discourse must exhibit power to affect the world around it. For First Nations artists and artists of colour, anti-racist talk at ANNPAC/RACA and the Writers' Union, sympathetic though it may have been, remained symbolic until it was taken back within their own circles, teaching us that speech can become political by virtue of control over its location. Legitimizing discourse needs to be conducted and controlled by artists, who in claiming it for themselves, act like the stakeholders they are instead of like the clients the have been made out to be.

A small circle of artists in Winnipeg have recently begun another discourse, one more directly targeting the public arts funding of the Manitoba Arts Council (MAC). Their critical approach, like Robertson's, is pragmatic: take the art funding system at face value, judge it by its own principles and hold it to its promises. They are less concerned about how artists connect with particular communities or how communities are formed than with the idea that artists are themselves a constituency with specific entitlements to public funding.

Writing in the new (as of 1994) zine *Street*, artists Robert Mears and Scott Ellis stepped into the noticeable breach in credibility created by scandalous *Winnipeg Sun* attacks on the MAC.[16] Like Kester, they are unafraid of rocking the boat and risking further controversy to achieve a longer-term and more substantial gain.

Robert Mears[17] gives an interesting economic assessment of the problem facing artists. Using a principle espoused by the arts councils—that no more than 20 percent of funding should be spent on administration—he argues that government arts budgets be increased so that the arts councils themselves spend no more than 20 percent on administration, leaving 80 percent flowing directly to artists. It is not a matter of reducing administrative costs, as councils everywhere are intent to do, but of increasing budgets so that the existing administrative costs, taken as a fixed institutional cost, amount to no more than 20 percent. On the basis of on the current Manitoba government budget for the arts (approximately $3 million), he proposes a fourfold increase. That increased budget would enable MAC to pay 400 Manitoba artists a living wage of about $27,000 per year.

Mears avoids theoretical issues, begging the fundamental legitimation question: why would the public not be even more outraged than it already is at the prospect of a considerably wider and deeper public trough for artists. He manages nevertheless to put a completely different spin on the arts funding issue: why should artists not earn a self-respecting, if modest, income? And perhaps more importantly, why should that income not derive from public funding?

Scott Ellis[18] similarly avoids theoretical issues, instead identifying three crucial problem areas with council funding: visibility, accessibility and accountability. Ellis argues that arts councils need to make the criteria for awarding grants and the application of those criteria clear to everyone. Councils need to ensure that all artists have equal access to the system and that relationships with those funded be kept upfront; councils need to be able to explain their decisions when called upon to do so and artists should be able to have those decisions reviewed.

Ellis argues that public arts funding would be more legitimate if the arts councils would:

publish lists of jurors, arts officers, grants recipients and values of grants; publish lists of eligible jurors; ensure that jurors do not serve consecutive terms; allow artists to meet with jurors; require jurors to produce written reasons for their decisions; guarantee artists' a right to appeal negative decisions.

What Ellis is suggesting is an administrative regime that is rights-based, like those that govern welfare, education and employment—regimes where questions may be raised about where the money is to come from but where few people question the fundamental principles of public support. In these regimes rights are accorded by statute; the right to a minimum amount of money where none other is available, the right to be graded according to certain standards and to protection from unfair grading and the right to decent working conditions. These systems are visible; everyone can read the regulations. They are accessible; they establish eligibility criteria and, if you meet those, you qualify. And the systems are accountable for what they do; once qualified, you get a predicted benefit and if you do not, there is a mechanism to review why.

Discourse itself is a form of social action, but for discourse to translate from symbolic to political requires more than a change of syntax or vocabulary. Rather, the discourse must exhibit power to affect the world around it.

It has been and will again be argued that these administrative structures do not easily adapt to the arts; financial assets and income can be checked, a term paper can be re-read, either you pay overtime or you do not. Whereas in the arts, even if criteria could be established and regulations written, what would they quantify and what benefits would artists qualify to receive? Would appeal rights serve any meaningful purpose? Who would review subjective issues of juror ignorance or legal issues of bias? A judge?

As difficult as these issues seem, there is evidence that the arts are moving toward a more rights-based form of structure. Shortly after the Criminal Code of Canada was amended to prohibit so-called child pornography, artist Eli Langer was charged and his paintings confiscated. The community rallied and the Crown lost its case. But the Court did not strike down the law as unconstitutional. Rather it found that Langer's work was an allowable exception because it had artistic merit. So here in the realm of restrictive prohibitive laws, there is quantification and regulation of art. Experts are called and a judge decides. It is not such a great stretch to apply that structure to the other side of the administrative coin, to a regime that confers benefits on artists, not merely restrictions.

This was the hope that lay behind Status of the Artist legislation. The federal legislation acknowledges that fine artists are engaged in a form of labour, confers on them a statutory right to form collective bargaining units to negotiate with federal agencies, and it establishes a body to certify those units. It is a step in the direction of a rights-based structure for the administration of cultural production.

VI

At a conference held in Montreal in September 1992,[19] artist Rebecca Belmore said that for her to turn up in the exhibition "Land, Spirit, Power" at the National Gallery was like being flushed down the toilet—you never know where you might pop up. She then laid out in a circle around her chair the dollars she was paid for appearing at the conference: an interesting reflection on how anal the public funding system can be. Belmore talked mostly about working in her own community, how important it is to have a particular audience and place as constants in her life. Her message was clear: it is futile to pander after public funds, artists should stick with what they know—how to make art and who they make it for.

Belmore represents the artist that Kester believes will re-legitimize public arts funding. She is connected to one of "an enormous number of constituencies, movements and communities within the [American] public whom artists can work with and learn from ... as collaborators and participants in the daily struggles of life."[20] Certainly then, it is one alternative that artists should seek out, return to or invent particular communities of interest and develop deep commitment to such communities. But this cannot be everyone's answer. For many artists community is as abstract as Greenbergian modernism.[21] Moreover, "community," as a rhetorical term, is subject to shifts in political tide. Identification with particular communities lends artists a definite political advantage only so long as there is a government that believes in patronizing, or is intent on co-opting, those communities. And today, governments seem too cynical about what the public thinks to care about the electoral power of local constituencies.

Laocoön, William Blake, c. 1818, line engraving, 38x27.5cm.

Would an arts system dressed in more structural than merely ideological togs better weather the coming storm? Certainly many rights regimes have not stood up well in recent years. The welfare system in Ontario suffered contractions even under the pro-welfare NDP. It is almost absurd to suggest that an arts funding regulatory regime, call it Artcare, could in this climate obtain anything like the legitimacy of Medicare, itself rapidly becoming an institutional negotiable. Nevertheless, the expectation of equitable access and a fair share of public resources represents a serious challenge to the current arts funding system and to our political leaders.

Public arts funding *has* fostered, however, a visual art in Canada not dominated by only a few heroic individuals but showing a depth and breadth of talent.[22] Many constituencies or communities of interest have emerged and they have evolved effective symbolic discourses. The discourses of race and of more general economic rights are particularly interesting because they are more than merely symbolic; through the development of terminology and control of the site of discourse, they obtain political significance.

It is cold comfort now that the Canada Council proposes to preserve grants to individual artists while "sacrificing" administration and artists organizations, for it is the latter, rather than the former, that are the sites of representation and political speech. These are the instruments of empowerment that artists need to take up now if we are not to let equitable access and fair share, fundamental communitarian and democratic concepts, perish beneath the rubble of a public arts funding system collapsed under deficit reduction rhetoric.

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Notes

1. This essay was made possible in part through a grant from the Ontario Arts Council, whose assistance is gratefully acknowledged. My thanks also to Tom Folland for his editorial assistance and to Andrew Kolubar and Grete Marstein for their early research contributions.

2. Grant Kester, "Rhetorical Questions: The Alternative Arts Sector and the Imaginary Public," *Afterimage*, January 1993.

3. Dwight Eisenhower considered Abstract Expressionist artists to be "storm troopers" using "psychological warfare" to spread the truth of American democracy throughout the world. See Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 205; also Christopher Lasch, *The Agency of the American Left*, (New York: Random House, 1968), pp. 63-114.

4. In Canada, the Company of Young Canadians (CYC) and programmes such as Opportunities for Youth (OFY) and Local Initiative Projects (LIP) of the early '70s have been similarly accused of dissipating radical energy into community projects.

5. Kester refers to and adapts criteria developed by Barbara and John Ehrenreich, "The Professional Managerial Class," in *Between Labour and Capital*, ed. Pat Walker, (Boston: South End Press, 1979), pp. 5-45.

6. "Artists' organizations are the research and development labs for the creation of new work [and] have carved out very specific roles relating to what they deem to be the driving aesthetic and social needs of artists within their community." Charlotte R. Murphy, Executive Director, National Association of Artists' Organizations (NAAO), "Introduction," Organizing Artists, (Washington: NAAO, 1992).

7. Kester, op. cit., p. 16.

8. Clive Robertson, "Competitive and Dysfunctional Autonomies within the Canadian Art System," paper delivered to conference, *Points de Force*, Montreal, 1992.

9. Kester, op. cit., p. 11.

10. Scott McFarlane, "The Haunt of Race," *Fuse Magazine*, vol. 18, no. 3, Spring 1995, p. 18.

11. The propensity of patronage to engender opposition is not unique to government programs: "Departments of literature in higher education ... are not wholly reliable apparatuses, since for one thing they contain many values, meanings and traditions which are antithetical to [the] state's social priorities." Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 200.

12. Kester, op. cit., p. 11.

13. "Artists and Art Institutions: Adversaries or Allies?" *Parallélogramme*, vol. 20, no. 2, 1994.

14. McFarlane, op. cit., p. 28. Media hype around the Writing Thru Race conference reflected the extent to which news about race has wide repercussions in many other communities. Criticism that the conference was exclusive failed to consider that such exclusivity is not only common, but protected by statute under other circumstances; a meeting of employees to consider forming a union, for example, may legitimately exclude employers and management, for obvious reasons.

15. Eagleton, op. cit., p. 118.

16. *Street*, vol. 1, no. 2, September 1994 (Winnipeg: Canadian Artists Incorporated). The magazine may be ordered from Canadian Artists Incorporated, 105-177 McDermot Ave. East, Winnipeg, Manitoba R3B 0S1.

17. Robert Mears "Raze the standard," *Street*, ibid., p. 16.

18. Scott Ellis, "Father knows art: patronage and its discontents," *Street*, ibid., p. 10.

19. *Points de Force*, Montreal, 1992, conference sponsored by the *Regroupement des Centres Alternatives des Artistes de Québec* (RCAAQ).

20. Kester, op. cit., p. 16.

21. Clement Greenberg's 1940 essay "Towards a Newer Laocoön," whose title I have borrowed, represented a pivotal declaration of Greenberg's support for abstraction and a seminal declaration of his intention to champion a movement that eventually became Abstract Expressionism, which came to symbolize American cultural supremacy in the 1950s. Unchained from other art forms by a concentration on the pure media of visual art, Greenberg believed that abstract visual art attained legitimacy: "The arts lie safe now, each within its "legitimate" boundaries, and free trade has been replaced by autarchy." I doubt that he would have countenanced that the self-same legitimation issues might arise in the institutions of art as they do within the frame. Clement Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoön," in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 1, ed. John O'Brian, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 1988), p. 32.

22. I am indebted for this legitimation argument to Greenberg who argued that modernist abstraction represented a fundamental break away from visual arts dependency on nineteenth century literary forms. For Greenberg, in art prior to abstraction there were only a few individuals with the talent to overcome this dependency. They were exceptions, working "in spite of" a dominant realism. Greenberg bemoaned the "scarcity of distinguished small talents," and how in the hands of lesser artists "painting and sculpture ... become nothing more than ghosts and 'stooges' of literature." No doubt he would be extremely pleased to see how thirty years of public arts funding has fostered many substantial talents unchained by past traditions, exploring contemporary issues and media with a commitment limited only by their imagination. Greenberg, op. cit., p. 25.

Pornutopian Premises, Positive Practices:

Michael Balser's Video Art and Activism

by David McIntosh

As the technologization of identity increases through the 1990s, the shape of cyborg destiny becomes clearer. In the guise of offering new forms of Net democracy and the supreme rule of the individual by remote control, global multinationals are extending their ideology of mass cognitive consumerism through a digital command and control system designed to tame, train and homogenize identity as well as to eliminate the bodily self. We are entering an era of global ordering based on mutant recombinations of feudal and insect organizational principles, where a concentrated hierophancy of symbolic manipulators and sysops manage billions of underpaid, undernourished and finally unnecessary McJobbers.

No identity remains entirely outside of or uncolonized by technology and its ideology; however, pockets of individual and collective identity based in bodily realities have resisted complete absorption into the machine. Exiled from preceding stages of identity technologization and denied commodity status in mass media representations, these pariah bodies have negotiated unique relationships with technology in order to sustain and evolve flesh identities. The emergence of Queer culture over the course of the last decade stands as one of the most potent illustrations of the intricacies, instabilities, contradictions, perils and pleasures of negotiating a cyborg future from inside our bodies. More specifically, a historical map of the broad shapes and dynamics of gay male appropriation and occupation of media technologies provides crucial insights into the nature of oppositional body identity.

> In the evolution of a collectivity of Queer image-sharers, each new advance in imagemaking technology triggered an analogous flurry of nation formation.[1]

Both vanguard and populist, gay male efforts to embody explicitly homosexual individual and collective identities through successive waves of new technologies have been negotiated on irregular, tenuous, non-binding and often contradictory terms, in contrast to the positivist arc of technology assimilation in the mainstream. Nineteenth-century photochemical technology's restriction of the production of homoerotic identity to ambiguous subtext in still photographic images was coded primarily for elitist, formal academic, aesthetic or anthropological functions, a project perhaps best exemplified in the work of Baron von Gloeden. These limits were not overthrown until the '50s with the emergence of Polaroid photography and the first home porn. This inexpensive, uncomplicated and accessible technology provided the

means to widespread democratization and explicit sexualization of Queer self-representation, the massive evidence of which can still be readily found in New York's Gay Treasures archive. This populist aesthetic and political project reached its fullest artistic expression decades later in the work of Robert Mapplethorpe.

Also in the '50s, motion picture technology, peaking in profitability and market penetration, sought new consitutencies to fend off the impending threat to its monopoly on popular consciousness by television. This corporate conflict between a mature photochemical process and an emerging electronic media technology opened a space for the nascent gay avant-garde film movement. Kenneth Anger's *Fireworks* (1947) and Jean Genet's *Un chant d'amour* (1950) signaled a new relationship between film technology and gay identity, spawning a flourishing film underground in the '60s (Jack Smith, Andy Warhol, Gregory Markopoulos, Ken Jacobs) as well as a populist commercial hardcore gay porn film industry in the '70s (Wakefield Poole, Fred Halsted, Joe Gage). Gay occupation of motion picture technology's most exalted industrial commodity — the theatrical feature film — was only fully realized in the late '80s and consolidated in the '90s by auteurists Gus Van Sant, Todd Haynes and Gregg Araki in a movement designated by critics as the "New Queer Cinema."

Still from *Positive Men*, Michael Balser, 1995, video, 50 min.

Since its inception, broadcast television has resisted all efforts to negotiate even a minimal site within its totalizing reach for any Queer identity other than niche market or underexploited consumer colony. Paradoxically, gay identity construction played a determining role in the assimilation of VCR technology in the early '80s. Backlists of gay porn films from the '70s and a steady output of new films were repurposed to videocassette, a format that afforded unprecedented access to gay images outside of major urban centres and in the privacy of viewers' homes. Mass Queer demand for VCRs and a constant supply of sexually explicit imagery brought VCR technology to critical mass, shaping its evolution from prohibitively expensive gadget to affordable household appliance. The subsequent growth of an extensive underground network for the circulation of gay porn videos provided the crucial link between production and consumption. And within this integrated system of image circulation, a constellation of perpetual motion fuck stars, heroic role models and fantasy stimulators took shape. One of the earliest and most widely emulated VCR stars was Richard Locke, a butch, bearded trucker in Joe Gage's trilogy (*Kansas City Trucking Co.*, 1976, *El Paso Wrecking Corp.*, 1977, *LA Tool & Die*, 1979), whose vigorous sexual performance reached iconic status in the evolution of collective gay consciousness and sexual behaviour. With the proliferation of consumer video cameras in the late '80s, the production of gay porn evolved from a centralized industrial process into a personal prerogative. A new form of self-representation, home video porn, redefined the map of technologized and sexualized embodiment as an emergent and pliable working surface for diverse desiring subjectivities, much as Polaroid technology had done forty years earlier.[2]

The relationship of Queer identity to the latest wave of new technology — digitally based computers — is still being explored and negotiated. To date, digital technologies have been applied by Queers to enhance, proliferate and extend access to applications of last wave analogue technologies. Traditional notions of publishing have been overturned by the Queer zine explosion, an anarchic, experimental, populist shifting ground of subjective self-representations powered by merging desktop computer publishing with photocopy technology. Computer enhancement has transformed telephone technology into an array of Queer voice-mail and chatline services (Manhunt, Cruiseline, Manline) where thousands of gay men regularly speak and project their sexual identity anonymously, as they search tree structures of categories — long-term relationship, casual encounter, SM, bisexuals, group sex, phone sex — for an eventual bodily connection. Phone technology also sustains Queer e-mail services where computer and modem equipped subscribers can construct and exchange digital text and picture representations of self through a global network. More extensive digitalization of Queer identity will be highly problematic; the ideology of the mutable, meatless, intellectualized and loathsome virtual body that propels digital technologies is on a collision course with a resistant Queer identity grounded in the non-negotiable pleasures of specific, inflected, flesh bodies.[3]

Perhaps the most crucial determinant in the history of the dynamics of Queer identity's transformative interaction with technology is the HIV/AIDS epidemic. In 1982, mass media technologies that refused any Queer imagery to this point suddenly turned their focus on gay men with a vengeance. Hysterical media constructions of the gay male body as the ultimate metaphor of death and disease became lodged in popular consciousness through the relentless propagation of dangerously false notions of "gay cancer" and "GRID" (gay-related immune deficiency). Meanwhile the physical bodies of infected gay men were delivered into the hands of another system of technology — science-based medicine — for testing, observation, categorization and experimentation. Almost fifteen years after the onset of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, the technologies of science and medicine have yet to develop a viable comprehension of, or reliable, successful treatment of HIV/AIDS, while mass media technologies continue to resist education and prevention efforts. By the mid-'80s, video as a technology of resistance was fully deployed by gay artists, activists and community groups to produce and distribute explicit information on HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment, as well as to resituate battered technologized identity in the physical realities of desiring sensual bodies.

In March of 1983, I read Larry Kramer's article in The New York Native — "1,234 And Counting." That was the first time a publication had used the word "epidemic." My world changed.[4]

Stills from *An Evening with Richard Locke*, Michael Balser, 1992, video, 9 min.

One of the artists who has played a pivotal role in mapping and negotiating Queer identity through the complexities of changing technologies and the HIV/AIDS epidemic is Toronto video artist and activist Michael Balser, whose project has consistently embraced collective as well as individual aesthetics and processes. An HIV+ gay man, Balser has been a leader in community- based video production throughout the AIDS epidemic. As an originator of the "Toronto Living With AIDS" cable television project, he produced a series of fourteen half-hour videos by artists working with community organizations to create HIV/AIDS awareness, prevention and treatment materials constructed from within diverse racial, gender

and sexual identities. He also co-directed two segments in this series: *The Great AZT Debate* with John Greyson, and *Voices of Positive Women*, with Darien Taylor of the AIDS support group Voices of Positive Women. Under the umbrella of the Second Decade project, he coordinated and produced a series of fourteen public service announcements for broadcast television by gay and lesbian artists and AIDS activists. In addition to these larger collective projects, Balser has maintained an ongoing collaboration with his partner, visual artist Andy Fabo, to produce a series of acclaimed art tapes, while continuing to elaborate his individual artistic vision in a range of solo video and installation works. Comprising over twenty-eight tapes produced over a fifteen-year period, Balser's artistic/activist project illuminates a range of normally inaccessible interstitial zones of evidence and experience underlying Queer identity. Entering his second decade of living with HIV/AIDS, Balser has recently produced three videotapes of remarkable insight which coil around the dialectical and adaptive relationships between the complex organization of sexualized, embodied collectivity and technologies of representation and communication.

Richard Locke appears naked and aroused on stage in front of a live audience updating the traditionally silent ritual presentation of his body as an object of lust.

Beyond the Helms of the Sensors (1992, co-directed with Andy Fabo) is simultaneously a documentation, deconstruction and parody of the emergent digital Queer nation. The state of "Pornutopia" is a videocracy founded on the principles of dildo voodoo (a vulgarization of the frigid techno-rhetoric of virtual sex) and ruled self-reflexively by directors Balser and Fabo. Reconfigured and projected into their construction as two sleazy sultans, they toy with technology, spinning antique zoetropes to animate stills from Warhol's *Blowjob* and drawings of winged phalluses. Relegated to the realm of projected desire by the ravages of time and the passing of their own corporeal perfection, these two indulgent porn adepts dedicate their lives to the production of the ideal artifact of Queer pornography. They are displaced from their plushly carpeted and richly draped palace by Ryan, a sex worker in real life who performs an archetypal scene from gay porn video. Ryan, costumed as a construction worker, strips to reveal a perfectly muscled youthful body and a luscious hard cock. After caressing and jerking himself off to a thrilling climax, he dresses, picks up his hammer and dismantles the sultans' pleasure palace, which is nothing more than a flimsy studio set.

Elsewhere in Pornutopia, lesser porn directors (singer/performance artist Meryn Caddell and screenwriter Ed Riche) struggle to imagine and construct porn artifacts, pondering questions like "Should there be emotional content? Should it be funny? Should it be two hours of hard fucking?" More porn sequences emerge. Documentary footage of an Alberta rodeo slips into a recreation of a cowboy fuck initiation scene from porn's past — "This is how we do it in the Wild West, boy" — based on Richard Locke's performance in the 1982 classic *Heatstroke*. The real Richard Locke, some twenty years later, appears in a documentary interview, recalling the growth of the porn industry and his sexual stardom and artistry. More interviews with filmmaker John Greyson and writer Robin Hardy elaborate the history and meaning of gay porn production.

Above and p.25: stills from *Positive Men*, Michael Balser, 1995, video, 50 min.

Looping through Pornutopia's system of sexually explict images, *Helms* eventually finds its way into the bedroom of two consumers, bored lovers trapped inside porn projections and alienated from each other, their sexual practice mediated by VCR sex stars. One complains "When we first got the VCR it was fun having sex to raunchy porn videos, but now it seems that's all we do and I'm frustrated." His lover responds "We've had fun in the past without the tapes and we'll have fun again in the future. I really need these images right now." Falling back in on itself in a circular deconstructive gesture, *Helms* concludes with reiterations of previous scenes coded as documentary interviews, however the reiterations are obviously performed retakes.

Balser's unique project recombines formal artistic, AIDS activist and oral history strategies to relocate resistance in our flagrantly sexualized bodies.

An arousing, ideal artifact of Queer pornography itself, *Helms* is a shifting non-linear terrain of recurrent and recombinant phenomena ranging from the factual to the fictional, existing in modes of address from documentary to performative, from direct to multiply mediated. While acknowledging its place within the syncretic history of technologized Queer identity, *Helms* problematizes current and incipient developments in the relationship between technologized systems of representation and the pleasures of Queer flesh. At what point does Queer consciousness projected through technology become a circular, self-sustaining system of infinite mirrored regression disconnected from its foundation in organic sexual activity? Will remote symbolic cerebral sexual exchange eclipse the lascivious liberational impulses which have till now guided Queer strategies for technological occupation? Will post-digital ideologies and techniques to transform the surplus organic body into an endlessly reproducible virtual body seduce the Queer body politic into obsession, passivity, dissolution and, ultimately, alienation from sex itself?

In his following tape, *An Evening With Richard Locke* (1992), Balser responded to the issues raised in *Helms* by focusing on a live performance by one gay man as a site of resistance where history, desire, body and technology intersect. Employing the simplest of production strategies — single-camera video coverage — Balser stripped away layers of technologically induced artifice to construct a direct portrait of Richard Locke. A late '70s video-porn star, Locke, now in his fifties, is grayer than his timeless video incarnation and also HIV+, but still a powerful icon of collective Queer consciousness. Reprising his in-person sex performances, Locke appears naked and aroused on stage in front of a live audience updating the traditionally silent ritual presentation of his body as an object of lust by speaking in the first person. His running monologue offers personal insights into Queer history ("Queer nation is magnificent. If my generation had only been more militant"), aging bodies ("I'm an older gentleman and sometimes it's hard for younger people to relate to older people. I'm always worried the younger generation may not hear what I have to say") and safe sex practices including explicit accounts of proper fisting and dildo techniques.

Balser has intercut this performance with a series of information cards containing HIV/AIDS statistics: "There

are 267 new cases of AIDS every day," "There is one AIDS death every nine minutes," "Forty million people will be infected worldwide by the year 2000." With this simple tape, Balser strategically defuses the spiraling threat of hyper-technologization of bodily realities by recoursing to simpler technological platforms, articulating an identity recomplicated and reactivated by the bodily threat of HIV/AIDS. In juxtaposing the actuality of Richard Locke's aging, organically real HIV+ body with the virtual memory of his youthful body immortalized in film and circulating beyond time in Queer consciousness, Balser plots the two axes of desiring identity. He then splices in mediated realities of the AIDS epidemic, altering the genetic core of our historical constructions of desiring embodied selves. This unique project recombines formal artistic, AIDS activist and oral history strategies to relocate resistance in our flagrantly sexualized bodies.

The AIDS epidemic has signaled the failure of mass media and science technologies to adapt or respond to basic physical survival issues.

Balser's most recent tape, *Positive Men* (1995), stands as his most powerful and expansive occupation of history, technology and bodily reality to date. Inspired by Marlon Riggs' video *No Regrets*, a documentation of the lives and the voices of dying cultural activists, Balser has assumed a strategy of visibilization through technology which counters both the virtual and organic disappearances of our bodies. Organized from inside the paradigm of HIV+ gay male artists, *Positive Men* is a journey through the collective experience of HIV/AIDS over the last decade to connect pieces of lived history into new meaning. The first half of this one-hour tape is a fictive construct in which eight men speak from an illusory space not fixed in time. Part performance and part re-enactment, colliding documentary with dramatic conventions, this segment distills and recovers the history of individual and collective responses to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Framed by a set dressed with turn of the century photos of male couples, evidence of a generation now gone, the actors simultaneously enact and analyse their evolution as a group, starting in 1983 with the formation of AIDS support groups. It was in the safety of this space that gay men learned to speak about the epidemic for the first time and that a vocabulary of AIDS evolved. Balser counterpoints this mediated personal and community oral history with a parallel history of the failing technologies of science, from the development of unreliable HIV tests to a recent scientific admission that the very nature of a viral entity is not understood. This segment closes in the present: December 1, 1994, World AIDS Day, a memorial to lives lost.

The second half of *Positive Men* is structured as a documentary journey through the lives and work of nine North American gay male artists/activists living with HIV/AIDS whose diverse approaches to technology cumulatively articulate a "by any means necessary" strategy of survival and representation. Poet Courtnay McFarlane relies only on the furious power of body and language to name and commemorate loved ones. Computer whiz Beowulf Thorne has appropriated the most sophisticated digital publishing technologies to produce the anarchic HIV humour zine *Disease Pariah News*. Andy Fabo creates fourteen-foot drawings of people with AIDS under microscopes to express the extreme subject/object relations that develop under the gaze of medical technologies. Stephen Andrew's *Facsimile* grows out of photographs of friends who have died of AIDS. Transmission by transatlantic fax erases portions of the photos, leaving technologically reduced visual memories of the body, much as people recede in memory when they are lost from their bodies. The last interview in *Positive Men* returns this tape to its source of inspiration, Marlon Riggs, a powerful artist who died before this project was completed, and whose final galvanizing words resonate with fury and hope.

Stills from *Blood Risk*, Michael Balser and Andy Fabo, 1989, video, 22 min.

The dialectical and syncretic relationships between technology and Queers built over the past fifty years are disintegrating into an irresolvable opposition. On one hand, the AIDS epidemic has signaled the failure of mass media and science technologies to adapt or respond to basic physical survival issues. On the other hand, rampant fetishization of corporate technological determinism embedded in digital command and control systems promises the dissolution of embodied communities into a globally homogenous compliant consumer colony and the disappearance of impure bodily selves into digitally virtualized insignificance. Positioned at the edge of this widening conflict between reality and representation, between body and technology, *Positive Men* interlocks with Balser's other works to weave disjunctively and intuitively through the broad landscape of technologized Queer identity to date, activating oral histories, received histories, collective memories, personal imaginaries, sensual ephemera, pornographic pleasures, illusory narratives, theoretical parodies, artistic artifacts as well as acts of mourning and commemoration. His agile manipulation of these elements elicits electrifying instants of insight into the unrepresentable subjective realities of embodiment in Queer flesh. Balser's work constitutes an intricate and prescient map of the promiscuous, unallied, artistic occupation of any and all representational technologies—new wave, last wave and no wave—for the purposes of assuring Queer sexual, physical and community survival.

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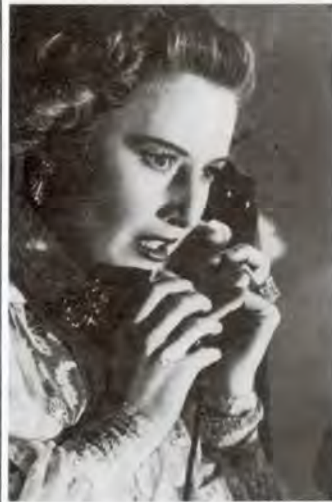
Notes

1. Tom Waugh, "Cultivated Colonies: Notes on Queer Nationhood and the Erotic Image" in *Canadian Journal of Film Studies*, vol. 2, no. 2-3, 1993, p. 167.
2. A unique and invaluable reference tool in sketching this all too brief history of sex and technology was John R. Burger's *One-Handed Histories: The Eroto-Politics of Gay Male Video Pornography*, (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1995).
3. For more extensive examination of the construction and deployment of digital systems, refer to my article "Cyborgs in Denial: Technology and Identity in the Net," *Fuse Magazine*, vol. 17, no. 3, 1994. Another relevant article which proposes an organically embodied critique of cyborg ideology is Margaret Morse's "What Do Cyborgs Eat? Oral Logic in an Information Society," in *Culture on the Brink: Ideologies of Technology*, (Dia Center for the Arts, 1994).
4. Dialogue from Michael Balser's video *Positive Men*, 1995.

Still from *Beyond the Helms of the Sensors*, Michael Balser and Andy Fabo, 1992, video, 30 min.



SORRY, WRONG NUMBER

Press Enter: Between Seduction and Disbelief

THE POWER PLANT, TORONTO
APRIL 21–JUNE 11, 1995

REVIEW BY CLINT BURNHAM

Over the past few years, as scientists and eco-activists have gloomily provided us with statistics on species extinction, rainforest and watershed depletion and global warming, the other intelligentsia—the media, the art world, writers—have giddily embraced, praised and hyped technology. Tiredly, this has been yet another wave of futuristic promises, which optimistically sees in technology the possibility for salvation. Once again social problems are being cured with machinery, but with a new twist. Unlike circa 1920s streamlining and '50s *Popular Science* visions of *Jetsons*-like rockets, techno-futurism '90s style is definitively ethereal—cyberspace. Referring derisively to the body as "meat," the new cyberjocks are a symbolically hegemonic class—white, male, professional. Same old, same old. Of course there are also significant variations: Donna Haraway's manifesto for cyborgs, in which she says she'd rather be a cyborg than a goddess; Samuel L. Delaney's influence from New Wave Science Fiction is also evident in gay and Black writing; and there are many feminist cyber-types. The phenomenon of *Star Trek* "slash" writing, where women write homoerotica featuring Kirk and Spock, is evidence that there are avenues for alternative expression in the cyber-world.

This cyber-hegemony has created its own intelligentsia, of course, ranging from the sensible Laurie Anderson to the whacked-out, right-wing stroke mag *Wired*, which is most likely to show a cable company executive on its cover, all decked out in *Mad Max* warrior gear: telecommunications as macho cyber-adventure. As Keith White writes in the Chicago zine *The Baffler*: "every issue of *Wired* blares forth the party line: being wired directly to manufacturers will mean more democracy, increased power for the little guys, greater freedom for consumers who will be able to order goods and talk to their friends (finally!) through an electronic medium."[1]

Conversation/Interrogation, Georges Bures Miller, 1991, interactive video installation. Photo: courtesy of the artist.

Here in Toronto we get "Press Enter," The Power Plant's show about art and technology. For the most part this is a pretty dull show, offering the standard cheer leading for technology (after all, it's sponsored by AT&T), with little thought given to diversity or social questions. Indeed, cyberspace is figured as curator Louise Dompierre's ennui in front of her computer screen: art as the bored manager's musings is not far off. The exhibit is offered as a way to ease our anxieties about the new technology. This is not to say that the artists represented are uniformly pro-technology—but the exhibit as a totality is organized around that very principle:

> Both life enhancing and a source of inspiration for the popular imagination, cybernetics has reached into almost every aspect of everyday life: from the home to the office, from the desk of the scholar to that of the journalist, few activities have not been affected to some degree. Yet much apprehension, even anxiety, about this field remains. Given that both the terminology and the concepts are new and sometimes difficult, and that it tends to raise as many questions as it appears to answer, cybernetics has yet to gain general acceptance. Both personally and as a curator, I find myself ambivalent about the subject—attracted to the advantages that technology offers and wary of the consequences of some of the changes it fosters. Much of contemporary art is involved with these issues.
>
> —Louise Dompierre: "Introduction: On Hold—Between Seduction and Disbelief"

The real problem is that we haven't been paying attention in class: if those of us who are skeptical about technology could just keep up with the hard words (and the new models of computers and programs: spending money, that is), it would be a lot easier. And everything is equalized: all work is finally the same, working at a computer. This formulation represents the ultimate wet-dream of technology: it will erase all difference. And so, "Press Enter" is boneheadedly monothematic.

Family Portrait: Encounter with a Virtual Society, Luc Courchesne, 1993, interactive installation. Photo: courtesy of the artist.

Every time I turned around, it seemed, I could see myself in a video monitor. Ugh. Interactivity. (For all its ethereality, interesting enough, this current wave also is about hardware: the tech stuff. And thus it resurrects that '60s word, "cybernetics." We will be expecting Isaac Asimov's three rules for dealing with robots pretty soon.)

Twelve artists are in this show: Sylvie Bélanger (Canada), Jim Campbell (U.S.), Edmond Couchot (France), Luc Courchesne (Canada), Christine Davis (Canada), Catherine Ikam (France), John Massey (Canada), George Bures Miller (Canada), Christian Möller (Germany), David Rokeby (Canada), Julia Scher (U.S.), and Bill Spinhoven (Holland). Work by Campbell, Ikam, Möller, Spinhoven, Miller, Scher and Courchesne all featured some kind of "interactivity," usually something where you see yourself on a monitor. But the pieces rarely bothered to offer a critique of surveillance; rather the technology just becomes a way to do cyber-art. It's unfortunate some more critical stuff wasn't brought in.

Scher's *Predictive Engineering* tries to offer some critique. The set-up of her piece is two cameras and two monitors with some gloriously tangled cabling and stands. Her piece seems to offer the best way of using interactivity in the show: taking images from a live feed and sticking them into some vague mental hospital/science fiction narrative playing on the monitors. Texts on the screens talk about scanning the body, like the retinal scans now being used at Cabrini Greene housing project in Chicago. In this way Scher's deconstruction of both science fiction adventure stories and the camera as surveillance offers a social comment on technology. Since technology can be used as a further means of classifying and intervening into peoples' bodies, marginalized people can be under threat: in an interview Scher draws a parallel between a mental hospital and the museum or gallery: both are institutions. This Foucauldean sameness undoes to some extent the work's politics, erasing differences in the institutions' effects—psychiatry versus canonization.

Quite a lot of the other work is more about exploring the mixing of live and recorded video footage. Spinhoven's piece, *I/Eye*, is a monitor showing a giant eye, which can "follow" someone walking by—why do I feel this would work well at the Ontario Science Centre? There are pieces you can walk in (Rokeby's *Silicon Remembers Carbon*), or blow into (Couchot's *Je sème à tout vent (plume et pissenlit)*); video lovers you can disturb (Campbell's *Untitled (for Heisenberg)*). Like cybernetics hanging in from the '60s, Heisenberg's uncertainty principle brings back ideological streamlining, an indeterminacy also found in contemporary theory (Richard Rorty, Derrida). Courchesne's *Family Portrait: Encounter with a Virtual Society*, Miller's *Conversation/Interrogation*, and Ikam's *Identité III* all use the viewer and/or image in some kind of interview-like situation. Combined with a couple of pieces by Campbell that also use the viewer's image, I got quite tired of this the day I saw the show. Maybe I'm not fascinated enough with myself.

Finally, some work just seems to be sculpture with shiny plastic materials: Bélanger's *The Silence of the Body* has giant face-parts strewn around a room while Christine Davis's *Le dictionnaire des inquisiteurs (tombeau)* has contact lenses with words etched on them. Because of the thematic monism of the show, such slightly divergent works seem harshly out of place. Some of the issues raised—the fragmentation of identity, non-place or Utopia in cyberspace, the body-machine combinations—are interesting. And I do like some of the ways video is used here, for instance: various non-narrative forms like instant or delayed feedback, storage memory. But it seems to me that the radical potential of a lot of the uses of technology (and their deleterious effects on people) is under-represented and under-critiqued here. There's a dated, '70s tone here, too, with theoretical concepts of panopticon, scopophilia predominating. The Canadian fascination with technology goes back at least to Marshall McLuhan. (Derrick de Kerckhove, director of the McLuhan Program in Culture and Technology has an essay in the catalogue.) "Press Enter" is part of that Canadian ideology. There are these signs in my neighbourhood: we are under surveillance to stop drug dealing, but in case of emergency we still have to call 911. Here, you're part of the art work, but in case of inspiration, go home and make your own.

Note

1. Keith White, "The Killer App: Wired Magazine, Voice of the Corporate Revolution," *The Baffler* 6, pp. 23-28.

Clint Burnham is a small press activist and a member of the Fuse editorial collective. He is the author of The Jamesonian Unconscious: The Aesthetics of Marxist Theory, *published by Duke University Press.*

RE-ORIENTING ASIAN

Millie Chen
Cook and Crave

YYZ ARTISTS' OUTLET, TORONTO
APRIL 26–MAY 20, 1995

REVIEW BY JAMELIE HASSAN

Installation view of *Cook* (background) and *Crave*, 1995.

For those of us who have at one time in our lives sweated out our imaginings labouring in the back kitchens of Canadian restaurants or at the stoves and counters of our home kitchens, Millie Chen's installations at YYZ are a memorable experience. In this exhibit the kitchen claims its legitimate place in the locations of culture, a site of instruction and production. Akin in place of birth and sentiment to Taiwanese filmmaker Ang Lee (*Wedding Banquet* and *Eat Drink, Man Woman*), Chen employs with humour and visual richness food's material culture—in particular, its production and consumption and the influence of food in the stir of memory that can hinge on the slightest scents.

Labour, sweat and the constitutive aspect of the body's regenerative possibilities are integral to the 1992 work *Cook*. The white clay bisked-fired tiles and their six-sided shape have strong cultural and biological associations. The cell of the body, the hive of the bee (the collective site of labour in nature), are all echoed by the shape and multiplication of the tiles. Further evidence of Millie Chen's explications around sweat, labour and the body's functions are found in the etched surface of the tiles where, among other details, the visitor finds the formula for sweat given in recipe-like or medical prescription form. Portions of the tiles are carved to create a hollow space containing the rich, dark brown liquid soya sauce. These luminous surfaces of soya are a tricky play on the dark brown glaze of Chinese hotpots. Other tiles contain only the residue of the soya. The process of evaporation and reconstitution (facilitated by the visitor who must pour water from a kettle at the "reconstitution station") is implicit throughout the exhibit.

The unexpected material of dried soya beans is the grout that tenuously holds the pattern together. Drawings etched into the clay tile subtly depict women's work in the arduous process of making soya beans into soya sauce. In his catalogue essay on Chen's work, Reginald Woolery points to the "heating, soaking, grinding and fermenting" techniques used to rid the soya bean of its bitter taste.[1] It is this material process of transformation that is so evident in *Cook*.

Memory 1: Banff, the summer of 1993, meeting Millie... soya competes with spice. In the hallways of the gallery, spice prevails, the door opens and soya overwhelms... I crouch on the floor of the gallery, sisters/cooks/artists, as Millie installs *Crave* late into the night. I help to place the details of spices, fragrant cinnamon sticks, dark clove on top of the red of paprika and the yellow of turmeric...

The structural foundation of *Crave* is the spiral, overlapping repeat motif made from 300 terra cotta spoons. These spoons are the Chinese soup spoons that accompany the soup bowl. Using this modest cultural reference, the Chinese spoon, hand-built like the tiles in *Cook*, rather than commercially produced, plays on puns. A household instrument that moves across cultures, it takes many shapes—the stirring spoon, the tasting spoon, the serving spoon. Here the work lifts the lid on ideas of function within the conservative ceramic tradition. The modest spoon in *Crave*, rather than the soup bowl, becomes the unlikely vessel for all the spicy ingredients.

Memory 2: Later that summer, the pervasive scent in Ghuangzhou, China, is the eventually repellent, cloying presence of soya sauce, unrecognizable at first because of the overwhelming density of the aroma.

Revisiting Millie Chen's installations *Cook* and *Crave* brings this memory forward, and along with it, the terrifying aspect of the markets of Ghuangzhou. I take some insights from an earlier Arab traveller. Ibn Battuta began his journey from Tangiers in 1326, determined to travel to the farthest point of Islamic influence in the world. Though his claims to having made the greatest journey of his time (comparable only to Marco Polo) were often disputed, he did in fact reach his destination, Guangzhou, in 1346. Ibn Battuta saw himself as a member of a large, global community and possessed a consciousness of the social and political reality of his times. Yet, in his comments on food, he was unable to repress his horror at the Chinese taste for certain foods that were quite outside the dietary habits of the Arab and Muslim. Six centuries later, I share Battuta's reluctance but discover the appeals of a Buddhist diet.

Detail of *Crave*, 1995, soup spoons and spices.

In *Crave*, the cook is the traveller making journeys prescribed by the earlier markings of trade and commerce between the peoples of Asia: the spice, the silk and the incense routes. Among the forced travellers are victims and captives of war. The brutal commerce of the slave trade becomes part of the market's transactions. The bodies of men, women and children are transported: concubines and domestics, artisans and performers, farm and factory labourers, the sweat and blood of empires.

Memory 3: Canada, 1950s, the migrant's journey with overstuffed suitcases. Smuggling of spices and dried fruit. What evades the scrutiny of the customs officer's nose and eye is celebrated in the kitchen. The aromas of Asia permeate the child's dreams and her future journeys.

Crave's trajectory is geographical and speaks to the rich expanse that is Asia—a category that some say is too large. What is lovingly inscribed in *Crave* is Chen's embrace of the Arabic-Islamic influence and, by extension, her recognition that this influence is a part of Asia. This acknowledgment spills across the ebony surface of YYZ's floor, creating a pattern whose origins are Andalusian. A freehand rendering in colourful, fragrant spices traces out the shadow of a tiled surface from the famous walls of the Alhambra in Granada, "the only Islamic palace of that age to survive in all its ornamental delicacy"[2] and the last Muslim stronghold in Europe.

As Joseph Needham has argued in his monumental work, *Science and Civilization in China*, the transmission of knowledge, materials and techniques can be understood in terms of the geographically bound nations of Asia creating a continuous region of intercommunication.[3] Central to his thinking was the productivity of the belt of agrarian lands extending west to east from the Mediterranean basin to China. Despite the careful work of scholars such as Needham, the historical record of Asia as it is generally told today omits or negates the Arab influence. The place of the Arab remains today culturally marginal to the identity of Asia.[4] The Near East and Middle East remain spaces peripheral to the larger cultural identity of Asia, of being Asian. *Crave* instructs and reminds us, leading us by our noses into the fullness of Asia and the history of this intercommunicating zone.

Memory 4: The wise take their cue from the nose of a three- year-old child who precociously identifies cinnamon, cumin, coriander, chili, peppercorn, saffron. The child ritually removes the containers of spice from the cupboard. The two are surrounded by the aromatic assembly on the table. He gently uncovers the lids and lifts the jars to his nose. He smiles and his lips shape the words; more gentleness involved in the secret delivered to his grandfather and the pleasure that his knowing achieves.

Notes

1. Reginald Woolery, "Cook and Crave: Millie Chen," essay in exhibition catalogue *Clay Between My Fingers*, (Banff, Alberta: Walter Phillips Gallery, 1994), pp. 11-15.

2. Ross E. Dunn, *The Adventures of Ibn Battuta, A Muslim Traveler of the 14th Century*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986).

3. Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilization in China*, vol. 1 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

4. See, for example, the catalogue of the recent Asian Heritage Month Festival held in Toronto in May, where West Asia is limited to Iran.

Jamelie Hassan is a visual artist based in London, Ontario.

AMONG OURSELVES, WITH OTHERS

Toronto Jewish Film Festival

BLOOR CINEMA, TORONTO
MAY 4–11, 1995

REVIEW BY SANDRA HAAR

Three years ago the Toronto Jewish Film Festival made its debut with a five-day programme of feature-length and short films. While each year the organizers have endeavored to name an overall theme for the year's programme, a consistent theme throughout has been the presentation of films dealing with the historically and culturally diverse aspects of Jewish life. This alone signifies the Festival's unique contribution to Jewish cultural life in the city, where the perspective of a homogenous reality has dominated. Its progressive focus has been developed and nurtured through the vision of the festival producer and director.

The festival's presentation of different Jewish realities, through films otherwise unavailable to North American audiences, has drawn enormous crowds where part of the evening's (or day's) adventure is getting a ticket, finding a spot in line and receiving periodic updates on the length of the line-up.

Still from *Balagan*, directed by Andres Veiel, 1994, 35mm, 90 min.

The programme of this year's festival was touted as centring on "relationships" (pre-fest article courtesy *Now Magazine*). While, on first glance, this proved to be the case, a closer look at these films reveals deeper perspectives and implications; they portray relationships between differences, relationships as political allegory and relationships in social and political contexts.

Traces and lines of Jewish history were seen through the documentaries *A Kiss to this Land (Un Beso a Esta Tierra)*, a Mexican film on the Jewish immigrants of the '20s and '30s from Europe, Turkey and the Middle East, the dramatic films *Like a Bride (Novia que Te Vea)*, portraying Jewish political life in Mexico during the '60s, the Yiddish films *Surrender!* and *American Matchmaker (Americaner Shadchan)*, and others detailing Jewish life in Berlin during the rise of neo-fascism, Miami Beach's declining community and Nazi-occupied Germany and Europe of the '30s and '40s.

I, Bajou (Le Nombril du Monde) is a French/Tunisian production chronicling the life of Bajou Benkahen as he rises in status in the world of business during Tunisia's transition from a French colony through German occupation to independence. Bajou's life mirrors that of Tunisia—from dependency to power—but also reflects the relation between the petit-bourgeois and various foreign interests. While the film explores many relationships within Bajou's extended family, it is to Moktar, an Arab accountant, to whom Bajou returns each time his fortunes have failed. His final visit occurs during the Tunisian Revolution, when Moktar tells him: "Tell your children and your children's children that we lived together." Following the suicide of his cousin and business partner, Marcel, Bajou walks through the narrow streets of Moktar's neighborhood, filled with protesters calling for the end of French occupation. He experiences a crisis of identity.

One haunting friendship that develops is that between Bajou's wife Habiba (through an arranged and forced marriage), and his cousin Marie. Marie earns Habiba's trust, arranging for her the cover-ups that allow her to visit her lover, all under the pretense of going to the movies or taking her shopping. Indeed, the theme of failed lover relationships due to social pressures recurs in *I, Bajou*: between Marcel and Moktar's daughter Amina and between Marie and her soldier-boyfriend Marc. Female friendships and support of choices continue in the film *Like a Bride*. It also portrays relations between the Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jewish communities in Mexico, and between Jews and the Catholic Mexican majority.

Still from *American Matchmaker*, directed by Edgar Ulmer, 1940, 16mm, 87 min.

Oshinica comes from a Sephardic family; Rivke is Ashkenazi. They meet through the socialist-Zionist group Hashomer. Oshinica's involvement with this Ashkenazi group is scorned by her mother, mostly for the unattractive uniforms they wear. Likewise, Oshi's ambition as a painter is deemed inappropriate. Meanwhile, Rivke becomes increasingly involved in the political life at the university, and with a fellow student, Saavedra. Both young women's families are appalled; Oshinica's by her rejection of a fiancé they approve of, and Rivke's by her romance with a Mexican (and non-Jewish) man. On the other side, both women contend with their experiences of "difference" in relation to Christianity and the presence of anti-semitism within it and the society as a whole: Rivke confronts her companions as they watch a pageant in which actors playing the Romans call for the death of the Jews ("They're not talking about you." "Well then, who are they talking about?"), and comments bitterly on the polite distaste evinced by Saavedra's father. The film shows the shifting expectations of relationships, with both Oshinica and Rivke rejecting the ethos expressed by Oshinica's father to her grief at her impending marriage: "Love comes later."

The real-life story of two women's enduring friendship is told in the Canadian film *When Shirley Met Florence*. These now elderly Jewish women recount their fifty-five-year friendship, through Florence's coming out, Shirley's marriage (to Florence's brother), the death of Florence's partner, and their ongoing interests in music, teaching and learning. The tone is sustained through the many scenes of warm interchange between the garrulous Florence and the wry Shirley who "finishes her sentences" ("but not so much anymore"). Through each woman's first-person addresses to the camera, their mutual understanding and acceptance of the other's sexuality is expressed. Florence speaks of her jealousy of Shirley's boyfriends ("I beat up a few") through to what her observation of the relationship between Shirley and her brother taught her. Shirley reflects on the inclusion of Florence's partner Sophie into their close circle, and her sense of loss following her death. The film also touches on, too briefly, Jewish lesbian life through Florence's experiences in the '40s—a virtually undocumented history.

Director Deborah Hoffman's lesbianism is only a small concern in her film *Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter*, but it comes during one of the key moments when Hoffman is reflecting on the changing meaning that things have for her mother. Hoffman's mother has Alzheimer's and Hoffman explains her changing attitude: "She was down to the basics: Frances was my partner. Frances made me happy. This was good. She liked Frances. Frances made her happy. This was good." The film traces the relationship between mother and daughter as both adjust to the mother's loss of memory. Hoffman is an engaging and ironic storyteller, extracting empathy and laughter from the hard stone of a painful tale. *Complaints* interweaves the *vérité* footage of Hoffman and her mother with Hoffman's direct addresses to the camera, in which she comments on the events and reflects on the meaning of memory, loss and personal identity. She grapples with the notion of "who you are without memory, without a past" and comes to terms with a life lived only in the present.

Mining the past to reassess the present is the core of the play *Arbeit Macht Frei* ("work will make you free"—from the inscription on the entrance gate to the Auschwitz death camp) developed by the Akko Theatre Centre in Israel. That production and the three founders of the theatre group—Khaled Abu Ali, Moni Yosef, and Madi Maayan—are the subject of a German-produced film, *Balagan*. "Balagan" is a Hebrew word meaning "mess." The film centres on the play, the producer-actors and the personal meaning that the play and its process of development has had on each of them. *Arbeit Macht Frei* explores the contemporary meaning that has been attributed to the Holocaust in Israel, using a visceral, interactive theatrical approach. It focuses on

extremes of physical experience—hunger, pain, confinement—and uses the symbols associated with Holocaust experience. *Arbeit Macht Frei* also reflects on the formation of the (Israeli) State and its displacement of the Palestinians, comparing the experiences of the Jews during the Nazi Holocaust and the Palestinians within Israel.

Madi, whose father survived the Sobibor concentration camp, is deliberately provocative in her stance: "The Holocaust is the new religion. We [the actors/the play] are blaspheming." She suggests that the "second generation" (as children of Survivors are termed) is processing the Holocaust in a new way. However, the film does little to explain the differences between the "old" and the "new" ways, and Madi's comments often seem provocative out of context. Moni is a religious Iraqi Jew. We gain a sense of the disparate worlds he traverses between his religious community and the world of avant-garde theatre. Unfortunately, very little of his views are revealed in the film.

Traversing a greater distance is Khaled, a Palestinian Arab. Within his own community he is considered a traitor because he works with Jews. Within the play, his Arab identity is made explicit. The first section of the play takes place in a museum of the Holocaust; Madi and Khaled are shown playing the parts of tour guides. During one part, Khaled presents a model of a concentration camp, explaining precisely what happened in each area. He addresses an audience member: "This is difficult for you?" She nods. "It is also difficult for me. Four years ago, I knew nothing about it...." He explains the process of learning about the Holocaust amid preconceptions that he had been taught. Later we see him in his village, trying to explain why he works with Jews in Akko in a theatre production.

Co-existence and co-operation are the fragile reality in *Flying Camel*, an Israeli production. Herbert Bauman is a retired Jewish professor who cycles through Tel Aviv looking for the remnants of architectural importance. He meets Phares, an Arab garbage collector, who discovers that Bauman's house is situated on the former site of his father's orange grove. He enters Bauman's house with a justification: "It's on my father's land after all." The two are joined by Gina, an errant Italian nun on a mission, whose trailer appears one morning in the yard. This trio of characters forms a political allegory for the colonization and settling of Palestinian land by European Jews, and the Christian Crusades to the "Holy Land."

As in *Balagan*, parallels are drawn. When Bauman laments the destruction of his father's Bauhaus-inspired building, Phares remarks that the house of his cousin was also destroyed—but this was because the son was throwing stones. Phares, who turns out to have trained as an engineer, stays with Bauman to assist him in the reconstruction of a historical statue, and also to carry out his own project of replanting the orange trees. In both *Balagan* and *Flying Camel* it is the projects and interests of the Jews, in the Jewish–Arab relation, that take priority. While this is in keeping with the recent history in Israel/Palestine over the last decades, these films alone represented a partial view.

Succeeding in presenting the diversity of Jewish experience and films that explore Jewish experience in relation to the experiences of other people, the Toronto Jewish Film Festival is also significant as a community event, contributing to that indescribable *atmosphere* that is as important as the work viewed. While their programming expresses the possibilities of greater understanding and empathy, the festival has not yet reached the level of dialogue hoped for by the organizers (as stated in the programme brochures). This can hopefully be anticipated in the years to come with their continual efforts and the willingness of their audiences.

Still from *A Kiss to this Land*, directed by Daniel Goldberg, 1994, 16mm, 93 min.

Sandra Haar is a Toronto writer, artist and editor. She has recently completed a personal/theoretical essay on Sephardic identity. Other works are forthcoming in Tangled Sheets: stories and poems of lesbian lust *from Women's Press.*

I WANT MORE KITSCHY FISH

Profile of Lee Bul

BY ANN SHIN

"If I lived in the West, I wouldn't be doing nudity," says Lee Bul as we sit down to coffee in the Toronto west end. "It's because it's still such a big deal in Korea that I do it." The first time she performed nude in Seoul's art district she was hanging upside down from the ceiling, bound and tethered, delivering a monologue on an abortion experience. People ran out of the theatre, a woman forgot her purse as she left, others sat in their seats crying. In 1989, nudity was unheard of among Korean performance artists. A nude artist, a woman no less, on the stage was just scandalous. It was too close to the stuff in the Itaewon strip clubs, the nasty part of town respectable Koreans don't talk about. Which is precisely why Lee was doing it.

Whether in life or in art, Lee is constantly butting up against notions of what's sanctioned and what's considered profane. She is shocking, not just for the sake of notoriety but to shake people, including herself, free of conventions. And there are many conventions that sit uncomfortably in a culture that has undergone an economic and technological revolution in the past forty years.

Lee's work is heavily informed by Korean culture and politics but it has traveled to Japan and Australia and been well received. Last year marked her performance debut in Canada. Her installation/performance piece *Unforgiven* raised some questions as to how well an artist concerned with cultural identity, translates herself for foreign audiences.

Abortion, performance, 1989.

I'll show you mine if you show me

On a cold winter evening last year at A Space Gallery in Toronto, the audience was considerably more subdued than the audience in Korea. We hung around the corners of the space and watched quietly as Lee changed costumes several times during her performance. She first played a Korean dancer with a tear gas mask, spinning and twirling herself into exhaustion. Then she was a mute Madame Butterfly whose movements were restricted to small tortured flutterings. Next, a seductress/wanton mincing around the stage. Finally she ended up nude, laughing big belly laughs that made her whole body shake. But she was the only one laughing. The rest of us watched aghast, or dumbfounded.

The running motif in the piece was clear enough—Lee was dealing with stereotypes of Asians. As she slowly stripped herself from the costumes associated with Asian women, she enacted her liberation from these stereotypes. So if the message was clear enough, why did it leave many of us fidgeting afterwards?

Maybe it was the intimacy of the performance. Lee stood close enough to the audience to have held a conversation with them. And in some ways she made the attempt. Her performance was confrontational to a degree, and we just didn't know how to respond. How does a Torontonian react to a nude person standing before her laughing? Applaud? Try not to stare?

Or then again, maybe it was the subject matter. Lee had spent the entire performance deconstructing her stage identity by taking on roles and discarding them. In that intimate space, she broke the psychological distance between performer and audience. As a result, her treatment

of costume and identity immediately became a comment on those around her who remained in their clothes. A deft turning of the table—and a power statement.

Not only was she more comfortable than we about her nudity, the stereotypes associated with her costumes had no power over her. Whereas we, the audience, remained conspicuously cozy in our own costumes. I was wearing a baby doll dress with parade boots, there were lots of docs in the house, some rave wear, Alpaca sweaters and a couple leather jackets. Oh, and I forgot, a lot of black. Granted you are not what you wear necessarily. But the use of clothing as signifiers in Unforgiven made us acutely aware of our own participation in an identity game which we take for granted in our daily lives.

Sorry for Suffering–You think I'm a puppy on a picnic?, twelve day performance, Tokyo, 1990.

Lee Bul is shocking, not just for the sake of notoriety but to shake people, including herself, free of conventions. And there are many conventions that sit uncomfortably in a culture that has undergone an economic and technological revolution in the past forty years.

Lotuses are not the only flower

But when it comes right down to it, I think the main reason behind the audience's discomfort was because the nuances in her parody were lost on those who didn't know enough about Korean culture. Take the hanging images for example. Hanging behind the audience were life-size photographs of Lee's naked body, made into quilted hangings à la Grade One art class. Beside them hung Barbie doll style gowns and accessories. On the far wall was a multimedia print of a circle of Korean dolls and a Korean dancer wearing a tear- gas mask.

Although all the images were equally vivid, they each took different levels of readings. The implications behind the Barbie doll gowns were immediately obvious to most. Barbie dolls and Barbie doll clothes were my first taste of glamour as a girlie-girl. And those long viscose gowns still do it for me now, no matter how hard I try to squelch it. But the disconcerting image of the tear-gas mask over the face of a Korean dancer is not as easily read. (Tear-gas masks used by riot police are a common sight in the downtown streets of Seoul.) The first image invites a straightforward reading, the latter makes several complex references which require a different approach from the audience.

If the subtle elements of Unforgiven were lost on the audience, then the remaining message was all to familiar for us. With the two images hanging across from each other, the installation and performance became a corollary on the east versus west. The woman under siege. The Korean woman under siege.

I am what you see what I wear what I am

Now I'll be the first to admit that it takes guts for an Asian performer to take on the stereotypes of geisha, dragon lady or submissive Oriental. I mean, that's what you spend most of your time trying to get away from isn't it? Your whole body rebels against it. So the anger and humour unleashed in a work that employs stereotype can be powerful.

But working with stereotype is a tricky thing to pull off because it is, by its nature, cliché. In Canadian and American art, stereotypes have been used as liberally as ketchup 'n' mayonnaise. They're everywhere.

Lee's Unforgiven was almost completely concerned with stereotypes of Asian women and the main part of the show stayed within the binary discourse of stereotype/anti-stereotype, dominant/subversive, center/periphery.

I want more kitschy fish

I would have liked to have seen Lee's other work which doesn't focus so narrowly on identity politics. An installation she did in 1993 consisted of rows and rows of decomposing fish hanging in plastic baggies along the walls. The fish were adorned with colourful beads and sequins hand sewn by Lee (her mother used to make sequined bags for a living). Her fish exhibit was at once kitschy, beautiful and repulsive. It raised issues related to women's work, cottage industry fishing, traditional versus the new, decrepitude and mortality.

Another work of hers that goes into interesting formal territory are her "soft sculptures." The silk quilted forms with numerous appendages are vaguely reminiscent of the illustrations of animals in Korean folk tale books. As pieces of sculpture, they subvert traditional notions of form in that discipline. They have no centre of gravity, and are thereby free of any of the formal restrictions usually associated with the medium. What's more, they're designed so that a human being can slip into them, in order to animate the sculpture.

Sometimes she'll pull an impromptu performance wearing one of her soft sculptures in the middle of downtown Seoul. Lee Bul can be off the wall, surreal even.

"the same bad movies ... the same plastic or aluminum atrocities" —Paul Ricoeur

But we didn't see much of that in this performance. In the context of her other work, it's interesting why she chose to do the show she did in Toronto. She told me she felt she should do something that was less complex, and so pulled together a show mainly concerned with stereotype and identity. In some ways, the choice of material in Unforgiven makes sense. She basically throws stereotypes of herself, back in the face of an audience in North America, where most of these stereotypes originated.

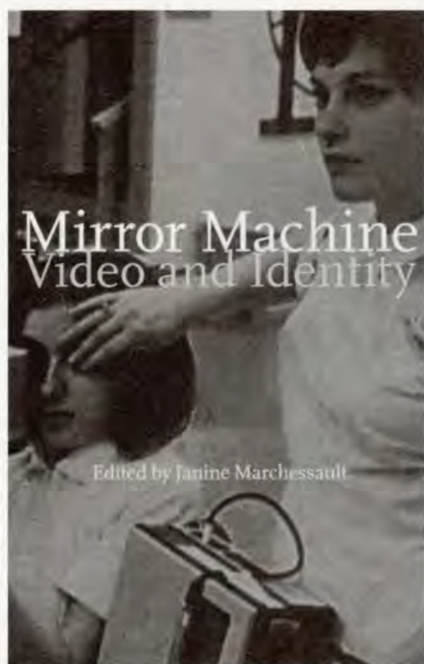
The only problem being that this is something we've been grappling with already for a long time. We live, eat and breathe identity politics in Toronto. When we apply for a job or decide where to go for dinner, or which blockbuster musical to watch, issues of "multiculturalism," "political correctness" or "appropriation" and downright "racism" are all part of our lives. It's hard to crack through the cynicism people have for these over-used words and the watered-down concepts associated with them—to actually drive something home.

Was Lee's dialogue lost on the Toronto audience? Her talent and power as a performer certainly weren't lost, but I think a different choice of material would have been more successful.

We've come to a stage where a piece mainly concerned with identity politics may be still relevant to the uninitiated, but for most artists it's time to incorporate the satire and criticism into something new. Something which doesn't indulge in relying on the binary discourse of identity politics to express an extremely complex issue, an intensely personal passion.

Perhaps Lee's satirical treatment of stereotype would have had a different significance in Korea. Her performance in Toronto did prove however, to demonstrate how ubiquitous these stereotypes are in North America, Asia and any other part of the world (Barbie dolls in Korea?). These images are in the movies, in magazines, on TV, in kids' toys. And it's easy for an artist to err in judgment between what's merely ubiquitous and what's universally significant.

Ann Shin is a Toronto writer and sound/text performer. Some of her poetry is in the anthology On a Bed of Rice, *by Anchor Books due out in the fall.*



THROUGH THE LOOKING-GLASS

Mirror Machine: Video and Identity

(TORONTO: YYZ BOOKS & CRCCII, 1995)
EDITED BY JANINE MARCHESSAULT

REVIEW BY STEVE REINKE

Mirror Machine is a collection of thirteen essays about community and art video in Canada. The essays are both historical and theoretical, though leaning heavily toward the historical.

The first section of this book is "Institutional Contexts." Janine Marchessault focuses on the NFB's Challenge for Change program. Nancy Shaw examines the history of two Vancouver artist-run centres, Intermedia and Metro Media, in the context of the federal government and the rest of Canada, particularly drawing comparisons to Montreal's Vidéographe. Kevin Dowler gives a quick history of the Canada Council to 1975 focusing on the institutionalization and the fund-ability of video art. Although these essays cover only the first decade of video's institutional history (roughly 1966–76), it is hard not to read them in the light of the Canada Council's current crisis. When Shaw speaks of the development of the Media Arts section as being on a continuum with Explorations, the Art Bank and Publishing Assistance, this is scary—Explorations is being dismantled, the Art Bank (despite being largely self-funded) has been axed, and Publishing Assistance is under intense scrutiny. (On another note, I hope it doesn't take until the year 2011 to see a book that covers 1976–91.)

The next section of the book is "Discursive Histories." Peggy Gale divides video art's twenty-five-year history in English Canada into four movements: conceptual, narrative, dramatic, and social:, as well as looking at Quebec production using the same terms in an altered order. It's a giant thesis packed into a tiny essay. Dot Tuer gives us a whirlwind tour of the last two decades of video art in English Canada. Apart from Tuer's misspelling of my beloved NSCAD (as opposed to her NASCAD), I have no complaints. And Monika Kin Gagnon becomes sensibly mired down in examining what the category "East Asian Canadian Video" might mean or include/exclude.

The last section of the book is "Community, Communication." Renee Baert focuses on a handful of videos to examine feminism in video art. Jennifer Kawaja outlines a process of using video within a community to induce social change through self-reference. Marjorie Beaucage has submitted a beautiful essay called "Aboriginal Voices: Entitlement through Storytelling." Written in a densely aphoristic style, the piece remains an extremely simple, seductive manifesto. I feel like a grinch not being able to buy into all of her assumptions. Tom Folland looks at video's role in AIDS activism, deftly covering video, its production and reception—including a critique of Canada's version of community cable.

All of the essays are very good—there's not one dog in the bunch. Still, I can't help but be disappointed. All these social histories are fine, and even necessary, but they dispense with any in-depth discussion of actual video works. Of course *Mirror Machine* does not purport to be about video work itself, so it is somewhat mean-spirited to criticize the book for what I'd hoped it would contain. Still, it seems somehow emblematic, even quintessentially Canadian, to take a given discourse's institutional apparatuses, rather than works drawn from the discourse itself, as the proper subject for critical attention. But out from the shadow of my overall disappointment drift the three essays which engage through a discussion of actual video work.

The first is by Kay Armatage who, after a lengthy and wide-ranging introduction, gets down to discussing the amazing work of Vera Frenkel. Christine Ross uses psycho-analytical theory in her intensely knotty examination of Vern Hume's *Lamented Moments/Desired Objects.* Somehow, despite the weight of her critical apparatus, she never loses sight of the video in question. Ron Burnett's essay is long and lumpy, full of seeming digressions—it would be impossible to synopsize. I found it riveting, even exhilarating.

Steve Reinke is a media artist and writer currently working on The Hundred Videos.

ADVANCING MANUALS ON CULTURAL ACTIVISMS AND ART THEORIES

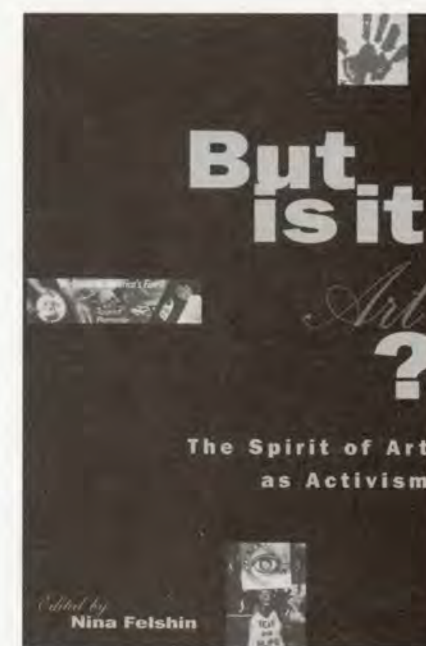
But is it Art?

THE SPIRIT OF ART AS ACTIVISM
(SEATTLE: BAY PRESS, 1995)
EDITED BY NINA FELSHIN

SightLines

READING CONTEMPORARY CANADIAN ART
(MONTREAL: ARTEXTE, 1994)
EDITED BY JESSICA BRADLEY AND LESLEY JOHNSTONE

REVIEW BY CLIVE ROBERTSON



Contents:

But is it Art? (authors' names in brackets)

San Diego media artists, Elizabeth Sico, Louis Hock, David Avalos (Robert L. Pincus); Gran Fury (Richard Meyer); Group Material (Jan Avgikos) ; American Festival Project (Jan Cohen- Cruz); Helen and Newton Harrison (Eleanor Heartney); Mierle Laderman Ukeles (Patricia C. Philips); Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge (Dot Tuer); Suzanne Lacy (Jeff Kelley); Artist and Homeless Collective (Andrea Wolper); Peggy Diggs (Patricia C. Philips); Guerilla Girls (Elizabeth Hess); Women's Action Coalition (Tracy Ann Essoglou).

SightLines (approximate topics in brackets)

Philip Fry (The Wacousta Syndrome); Michael Dorland (*Ressentiment* Canadian Nationalism); Bruce W. Ferguson (Canadian Stories: The Grand Silence and The Technological Empire); Marcel Saint-Pierre (Quebec Cultural Identity); Kim Sawchuck (Work of Don Proch); Serge Bérard (Work of Rober Racine); Jacqueline Fry (Museum in works of European, U.S. and Canadian artists); Charlotte Townsend-Gault (Kwakiutl Ready-Mades); Kass Banning (Work of Joyce Weiland); Christine Ross (Exhibitions; *Art et féminisme and Femmes-forces*); Diana Nemiroff (Artist-run Centres until 1983); René Payant (Speaking Performance); Walter Klepac (Deconstruction in Contemporary Art); Philip Monk (Reference and Self-reference in Canadian Art); Johanne Lamoureux (Return of Painting); Bruce Grenville (Toronto Sculpture); Jeanne Randolph (Subjective Writing with Psychoanalytic Theory); William Wood (Work of Roy Arden); Elke Town (Work of Colette Whiten); Carol Laing (Speaking to Painting); Varda Burstyn (Art and Censorship); Guy Sioui Durand (Recuperation via Self-censorship); Dot Tuer (Video in Drag); Monika Kin Gagnon (Work of Jamelie Hassan}; Loretta Todd (Notes on Appropriation)

One template for reviewing the *structures* of these two books is their focus on *auteurs.*[1] As validating vehicles, one book privileges the perspective of the art practitioner while the other privileges the gaze of the writer/critic/historian. *But is it Art?* is easily read as a series of case studies whereas *SightLines*—though ostensibly its content is about reading art and art institutional events and histories—can equally be read as about critical authoring as discursive intervention and personal-professional strategy.

As I am now past the deadline for one of these survey books of my own, I am only too aware of how the words that follow will (and already have) come back to haunt me. To review collections like these—ones that you reference and enjoy—is inevitably to argue with their necessary editorial contentions, their achievements and unavoidable limitations.

These two books share common features. They are both collections of essays, will be used as primers or textbooks, and in certain ways they both update previous, similar texts.[2] Each book is shaped around a defined chronology: mid '70s to the present for *But is it Art?* and the '80s for *SightLines.*

Both books have goofy titles; *SightLines* reprises those short, generic and ultimately meaningless names given to institutional art survey exhibits and *But is it Art?* unfortunately and misleadingly recalls a whole series of public disavowals that have appeared in newsmagazine cover features from *Life* to *Newsweek* from *L'Actualité* to *Maclean's* to *Toronto Life.* These periodic nods, some prompted by paradigm-generational shifts in contemporary art, have invariably been the product of journalism's suspicion that, unless checked, "high art" and alternative cultural production can quickly be reduced to some bohemian mockery of an epistemological stability upon which journalists traditionally construct their own work.[3]

Editor Nina Felshin admits in her introduction that the "ironic title," *But is it Art?*, would be answered by the participant artists with, "But does it matter?" One of the contributing writers, Jan Avikos, implies that it is not so easy to use irony to uproot the ideological biases that have set art and activism in hegemonic opposition. Avikos inverts this given with "But is it activism? The spirit of activism as art."

By far the most onerous common feature shared by these two books (and others like them) is the introductory essay that must historically position the contexts of their respective contents. This is a far trickier task than simply defending selections and providing introductory abstracts of the essays themselves.

Introductions to books that use a chronology as an organizing theme also use and construct historical sequences—whether these are sequences of theoretical or material practices or just simplifications generated by compressing earlier generalized histories. Such compressions give us "conceptual artists did this," or "activist artists are indebted to that," or at some particular moment in time there was "a demonstrated desire to present (outside of the country) a less institutionalized view of Canada." We may know through lived experience that such statements are not true, but willingly acknowledge that the books' editors can rarely escape the traditional expectations to provide terse, introductory linear historiographies.

Which brings me to why these two books are different and employ different strategies. Stereotypically, *But is it Art?* is intelligently but unapologetically assembled for an imagined general audience. As a consequence, too much space is taken up defensively asserting the featured producers' art *and* activist credentials when bulking up one or the other is usually sufficient. *SightLines* is more academically circumspect and understated about its politics of a new art history. While editors Bradley and Johnstone write, "The exercising of critical judgment throughout *SightLines* manifests a search for interpretative approaches that question the transparency of meaning in works of art and the institutional systems that contextualize them," there is little interrogation of how interpretative analysis itself can acquire its own transparency in those substitutional productions of meaning.

But is it Art? consists of twelve commissioned essays on art-cultural practices from both individuals and groups. The book, written by "leading art critics, historians, and journalists," had a writing-to-release production schedule of five months. It is, given its focus upon and engagement with contemporary progressive political practices, woefully universal; once again an American anthology that does not see the need to name its regional practices as such.

SightLines is an anthology of previously published essays. Like other Canadian books of its genre, this book took a few years to produce. In their introduction, the editors list the array of magazines that appeared to service this "fertile period in Canadian art" and go on to note: "Significantly, it was frequently artists themselves who launched these publications, designed and wrote for them, a fact that further suggests the limitations of the critical apparatus, as it had existed, to respond to the art that was being made."

The explanatory half of *SightLines* title is: "Reading Contemporary Canadian Art." As I have already suggested, its strongest organizing focus is how the selection of readings become anthologized. Its weakest is lack of a cohesive connection between the assembled contents. Divided into sections with titles like "Cross Currents" or "Systems and Symbols," the essays could be rubric-cubed into several of the categories. Though all of the essays are productive markers, for Bradley's and Johnstone's "informed reader" the collection can be somewhat of a pastiche with a little bit of everything.

Despite a claim on the cover that "an interrogation of the institutional structure of art permeate(s) this volume," it is also true that a substantial number of the anthology's contributors have given a number of regressive art institutions comfort and legitimacy. An opportunity to include the many tensions between practicing artists and museum or academic professionals that surrounded the different voicings and silences that contributed to the histories of the essays themselves has been missed. Have, for example, curatorial tenets of connoiseurship and biography been dislodged by otherwise successful theoretical colonizations? In this terrain, can we yet claim that actions speak louder than words?

Because of the broad mix of the authors in *SightLines*, it would have been useful to have a second introductory essay to provide an intellectual mapping of how different critical writing practices emerged from different social, disciplinary and occupational sites and affiliations. Who (aside from artists and journalists) emerged to read Canadian art in the '80s, why, with what tools, and to what effect?[4]

Upon an initial skimming of *SightLines* and its twenty-five essays, I attempted to mentally calculate how many major essays were produced in the artist and art magazines, journals and catalogues during the decade. From magazines and journals alone there could have been some 3000 eligible essays. *SightLines* usefully includes a general biography of some 100 related essays to those published. (A new video book project being undertaken by Lisa Steele and Peggy Gale reportedly has catalogued some 1850 essays on Canadian video over a twenty-five year period from similar sources.)

Despite the supposedly easy archival access to our recent magazines, there is a perennial sense of backlog experienced when consuming a book like *Sightlines*. This backlog could have been somewhat alleviated if periodicals like *Fuse*, *Parallélogramme*, *C*, *Borderlines*, *Fireweed*, *Inter*, *Border Crossings* and others had produced or collaborated on specific thematic anthologies of their previously published materials. It also might have helped if independent Canadian publishers had jumped on the generic cultural studies and Canadian studies bandwagons earlier and with a little more conviction toward contemporary cultural production. Contemporary art practices always slip into history and the numerous participants in those "boom" years themselves create the basis for a ready-made market.

Finally, without having described any one of the many essays in these two books, I can say that they interact well with each other on many issues of agency and governance within the production, dissemination and distribution of current art practices. Particularly those issues of validation that we often mistakenly believe are already adequately understood and rationalized.

Clive Robertson is perpetually finishing a book on art and cultural practices and mediation due to be co-published by Tellem Press and Artexte later this year.

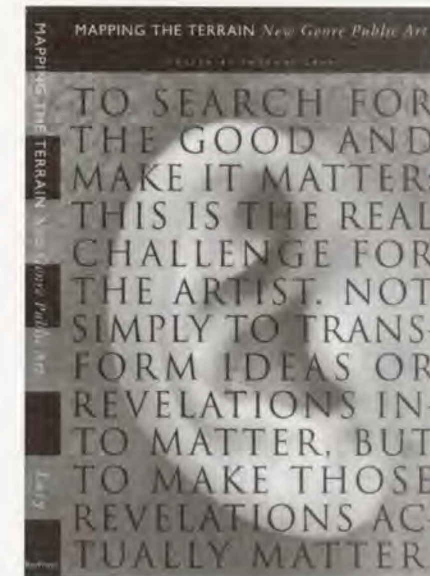
Notes

1. I want to thank Jim Drobnick who suggested that *But is it Art?* focused on the role of the auteur reinforcing art criticism's tendency towards "monographic fixation." See Drobnick's review of Felshin's book in *Parachute* 79, 1995.

2. In the strictest sense there is no precedent to *SightLines*. Nina Felshin acknowledges Lucy Lippard, *Get the Message? A Decade of Art for Social Change* (1984); Douglas Kahn and Diane Neumaier, eds., *Cultures in Contention* (1985); and Arlene Raven, ed., *Art in the Public Interest* (1989).

3. Following a similar article in *Newsweek*, John Bentley Mays wrote a cover story for *Macleans*, "Is This Art?" on the second generation of Canadian video and performance artists (9 November, 1979).

4. For an example of how other disciplinary projects address the same mappings of tensions and anxieties in English Canada, see Will Straw "Shifting Boundaries, Lines of Descent—Cultural Studies and Institutional Realignments" in Blundell, Shepherd and Taylor eds., *Relocating Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1993).



New Political Cartographies

Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art

(Seattle: Bay Press, 1995)
Edited by Suzanne Lacy

REVIEW BY DEBORAH ROOT

There is a disturbing irony about the presence of Hachivi Edgar Heap of Bird's 1991 work *Day/Night* in Seattle's Pioneer Square. The two porcelain enamel billboards contain text in two languages: on one side of each billboard, the words are in Lushootseed, a Native language of the Puget Sound area. On the other, the text appears in English. One reads: "Chief Seattle Now The Streets Are Our Home"; the other: "Far Away Brothers And Sisters We Still Remember You."

Years ago, when Seattle was still a smallish port city with a rough reputation, Pioneer Square was the hangout of an assorted mix of people: itinerant alkies from up and down the coast, multi-racial agglomerations of kids up to no good, crazy people and the various passersby who were in the square for all possible reasons. Today, the square is a gentrified tourist attraction glutted with expensive art galleries and espresso bars, and the city has instituted draconian anti-loitering laws, making it impossible for anyone not visibly spending money to contemplate *Day/Night* and the confiscated totem poles that decorate the square. Seattle has come up in the world, which means that money is being spent on "public art," and that the old seediness, or, rather, the old understanding of what constituted "the public," had to go. There no longer seems to be a public in Seattle—the mixed community has disappeared from the tourist areas where consumption is the only legitimate activity. *Day/Night* stands as a trace of the history of that disappearance of the public, both the Native settlement overcoded by the colonial city, and the mixed use of the square by people now deemed unsuitable.

What does the presence of such work in Pioneer Square tell us about public art in a time when public space is rapidly disappearing? The essays in *Mapping the Terrain* offer an alternative history of public art, examining the role of the artist in political activism and the role of public art in community identity and development. What binds the essays together is the view that art is part of the society in which it is made, and a desire to ground art practice in issues of community and resistance.

These are times of reaction, as the former inhabitants of Pioneer Square know well, and the question becomes how to locate a space of resistance, and to sustain the possibility of this space. A great deal of activist work in the past has focused on criticizing the oppressive social and economic structures and rhetoric of the system in which we live. Yet this can create an impasse of its own: we know how bad things are, but how do we move forward? Is there another way to approach activist practice? I was struck by Estella Conwill Májozo's words, mirrored in the title of her essay: "The task of the artist is to search for the good and make it matter." In other words, how may artists comprehend both historical and present-day oppression and transform this understanding into a new reality? Májozo seeks to rethink the relationship between spirituality and political practice; by undoing the categories of dominant Western

culture that separate artist and activist, Májozo is able to locate and call for a visionary path, one in which the artist is not separated from the community in which he or she lives. Májozo's "dream time" derives from Afrocentric thought, reflecting her belief that other traditions offer a way out of the impasse of Western modernism.

Many of the essayists in this collection evince a sense of urgency in the face of increasing poverty and repression in the North American context. As the *fin de siècle* approaches, performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña examines increasing militarization in the United States, the effects of the Gulf War, and anti-immigration rhetoric on the American side of the U.S.—Mexico border. Like Májozo, in "From Art-mageddon to Gringostroika: A Manifesto against Censorship" Gómez-Peña calls into question the colonial binarisms that continue to structure so much thinking in dominant North American circles: North/South, West/Third World are no longer useful (if indeed they ever were). Instead, Gómez-Peña focuses on borders, insisting that the artist must be prepared to cross over, which includes abandoning essentialist positions. But what constitutes a border? One of the most thought-provoking sections of Gómez-Peña's essay looks at how the practices and terminology of the contemporary art world can be co-opted by extremely reactionary forces, and he cites an anti-Mexican, anti-immigration demonstration at the San Diego–Tijuana border in which organizers referred to their behaviour as "border art." In the face of the current crisis, there is no time for sectarian politics and Gómez-Peña's strategy involves rethinking community linkages. "Artists and activists have become foreigners and exiles in their own communities," he writes, calling upon artists to interrogate their own practice and complicities as a way of building alliances among artists and communities, and among artists engaged in different practices. In insisting that "we must defend the survival of the art world as a demilitarized zone," Gómez-Peña offers a manifesto that is hopeful for change, but in these times I am not altogether sure how many artists attempting to survive economically will be able to find the courage to resist the increasingly corporate structure of the art market.

Muralist Judith F. Baca writes of the displacement of the Latino community in Los Angeles by the new corporate culture. In a parallel to what has happened in Seattle, in L.A. an increasing privatization of public space is taking place. Baca looks at how art practice can reflect a corporate view of land, contrasting Christo's grandiose projects with works by Native artists such as Richard Ray Whitman. Also grounded in community practice, Baca's work interrogates the notion of public art as monument, and argues that collaborative practices between artists and communities permit new kinds of monuments that speak to local histories and experiences.

As part of the project of *Mapping the Terrain* to provide an alternative history of public art, the final third of the book is a directory of over eighty artists and collectives of the last twenty-five years. With a few exceptions, the list focuses on U.S. artists, but it constitutes a useful reference tool, and it is encouraging to see the amount of work that has engaged issues of community resistance.

Many artists who engage in public art complain of bureaucratic red tape—clearly, privatized work is easier—and several of these essays raise questions about funding structures as well as the difficulties of collective work and collaboration, including collaboration with audiences. There are no definitive answers, but *Mapping the Terrain* raises timely questions (although I wonder if more could be said about the ambiguities that arise when artists accept certain kinds of public commissions). It is perhaps not to the point to ask why cities—the same cities that are promoting new disciplinary laws and statutes—are purchasing and displaying works that seek to undo repressive structures of meaning. But it nevertheless remains a paradox. If the state attempts to present an appearance of seamlessness, does the presence of critical, public art disrupt that seamlessness (despite the state's intentions) or can this work in some way reinforce it? If public art is to be more than an ironic trace of a possibility that no longer exists, then the contributors to *Mapping the Terrain* are right in grounding their practice in the histories and experiences of the communities in which they work. In other words, who is art for?

Deborah Root teaches at the Ontario College of Art and is the author of Cannibal Culture: Art, Appropriation and the Commodification of Difference, *forthcoming from Westview Press.*

Art, Theory and Activism in a Time of AIDS

Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture

(Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992)
by Craig Owens. Edited by Scott Bryson, Barbara Kruger, Lynne Tillman, Jane Weinstock

On the Museum's Ruins

(Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1993)
by Douglas Crimp with photographs by Louise Lawler

REVIEW BY GORDON BRENT INGRAM

Over the last twelve years AIDS has transformed virtually all aspects of our lives. The impact on sex and sexual politics alone has been brutally swift and overwhelming. The HIV pandemic exploded at a time of markedly new stances to the making of art—in particular, the shift to "postmodernism," site specificity and increasing confrontations with the "cultural authority" (Owens, p. 166) of entrenched misogyny, racism and homophobia. There have been a lot of Queers involved in "pomo" theory, some have died from AIDS, and all of us have had our perspectives radically transformed by what we have seen and lost. Even the connotations of "pomo" for postmodernist theory is instructive. It rhymes with "homo," and while does not refer explicitly to a sexual identity, definitely has provided a space to support Queer art and activism.

Beyond Recognition and *On the Museum's Ruins* are not about AIDS. But they show that things will never be the same again and, more importantly, that what we conceive of as power, place and truth, particularly in linkages between art, theory and activism, have been totally transformed by the contradictory forces of the HIV pandemic, the not-so-benevolent state and AIDS activism. The confusion, panic and horrors of the decade of despair, beginning in 1981, forced new theoretical perspectives, if only to have more clues to the changes imposed on our lives. While theory is again chic and there is lots of it being written, *Beyond Recognition* and *On the Museum's Ruins* provide the most useful and clear guides for understanding this most contradictory and increasingly Queer *fin-de-siècle*. In contrast to the recent deluge of dry postmodern chitchat on the book market, these two books are exceptional in their being "from the heart," having practical relevance to both artists and activists.

Craig Owens was a New York critic of rare vision. His theoretical work was particularly crucial in linking "site specificity" (pp. 17, 55, 150-186) to postmodernism, and feminism to gay male politics. Owens died of complications from AIDS in 1990. *Beyond Recognition* is his posthumous anthology and is made up of the many articles published in such journals as *Art in America* and *October*. More than any other art critic in the '80s, he laid the basis for a radical "postmodernism," one that relentlessly critiqued such now by-gone art movements as "neoexpressionism," exemplified by the pseudo-masterly sketches of now almost forgotten artists like Julian Schnabel (p. 148). Owens' early discussions of site, such as in his 1979 *October* essay "Earthwords" (pp. 40-51) on Robert Smithson, began to lay the basis for today's emerging concepts of "Queer space." Owens' most rigorous theoretical contribution was his 1980 "The allegorical impulse: Towards a theory of postmodernism," which foreshadowed the importance of (radical) appropriation of imagery and questions of authorship to the art politics that emerged within AIDS activist collectives such as ACT UP, Queer Nation, and artist/activist groups like Gran Fury, Testing the Limits and DIVA TV.

Owens was really the first theoretician to bring questions of feminism and marginalized sexualities into the early notions of (radical) postmodernism. More than anyone, he "decentred" (p. 166) and queered postmodernism and talked with optimism about the "coexistence of different cultures" (p. 186). In 1980, he was prophetic in stating that, "if one of the most salient aspects of our postmodern culture is the presence of an insistent feminist voice... theories of postmodernism have tended either to neglect or to repress that voice" (p. 171).

That it took over a decade for the problems Owens perceived to be widely recognized suggests that his vision is increas-

ingly relevant. One of Owen's last major essays, the 1987 "Outlaws: Gay men in feminism" (pp. 218-235), will have tremendous relevance to alliances between women and men for years to come. He charts the *re*construction of the "legend of the homosexual outlaw," Genet for example, and ends the essay exploring "the media's scapegoating of homosexual men for the AIDS pandemic—a homophobic tactic which is as threatening as the disease itself to the welfare of the entire population." (p. 232)

When Owens died, we lost one of the few male visionaries who had carefully thought out how to build authentic alliances between women and gay men.

Along with Simon Watney, Douglas Crimp has been the most prolific theoretician on AIDS/art/activism beginning well before his 1988 *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism* and 1990 *AIDS Demo Graphics On the Museum's Ruins* is about representation and appropriation in art, and the decline of the power of nineteenth-century institutions, particularly the great museums, to regulate imagery and interpretations of culture. His essays were written within roughly the same period as those of Owens. Crimp carefully exposes the so-called "objectivity" of the exhibition and shows it to be a lie through what he terms the "return of the repressed" (p. 108). Crimp covers a wide range of questions from the '80s, including those around the works of Robert Mapplethorpe and Cindy Sherman. Early on in *On the Museum's Ruins*, Crimp states that,

> in confronting aesthetic responses to AIDS, it is impossible to stay within the museum and not only because the most forceful responses rarely appear there. AIDS activist art does not seek primarily to interrupt our notion of art itself but instead to intervene in a wider arena of representation (p. 23).

In other words, the urgency of what was originally perceived as "the gay male health crisis" destroyed and re-worked the old boundaries between art and other forms of communication in ways that could not be as effectively controlled by the museum and gallery. Crimp then takes his critique much deeper to that of the biases and censorship of museum and modernist formalism (p. 25).

If there are remaining qualms about the necessity of putting AIDS and Queer activist art into the streets, Crimp's 1986 "Redefining site specificity" (pp. 150-186) relates it to questions of power and architecture. The latter parts of *On the Museum's Ruins* suggests various Queer archaeologies (p. 222) where context and place, as the public site where art is expressed, become more important than the pseudo-objectivity of the museum that tends to "dissemble" meanings (p. 287). At a time when art is increasingly being reduced to private intellectual property, Crimp portends a contradictory pressure where all art, if it is to be compelling, is taken to the streets.

To suggest that the main message of these two books is that critical art theory in the '80s and early '90s was shaped by the recognition of official negligence in an epidemic fanned by homophobia misses their full implications. There was also an increasing resistance to feminism, globalization of capital, and the trendiness of postmodernism as a means to scrabble what remained of the left. More than any others in activist art theory in recent years, these essays chart the relationships between the profoundly undemocratic forces that have been coalescing and provide the basis for new strategies. Perhaps these times will be remembered in history as much by the transcultural character of the pandemic, and the unmet needs to provide basic safer sex education, along with the subtleties of state censorship. There was a conspiracy of silence and this silence did and does equal death for too many. And when conventional political organizing did little to create new programs to slow the numbers of infections, at least the slim line linking art and theory and activism held some hope. These books are about building in the increasingly devastating aftermath while still only having a limited understanding of what happened. *Beyond Recognition* and *On the Museum's Ruins* allude to what is happening and can happen in the second decade of the pandemic when death, loss and disorientation is increasing, but where the percentage of new HIV infections in gay men is declining. These two books show us how an epidemic provided one of the crucial bases for the difficult birth of Queer theory and how what we conceive of art and theory and activism has been queered forever more.

Gordon Brent Ingram has been active in gay and lesbian political and cultural projects for over twenty years and lived in San Francisco in the early '80s. He received a doctorate from Berkeley in 1989. He is a member of the recently formed Queers in Space, Vancouver, a group of architects, designers, planners, artists, and activists.

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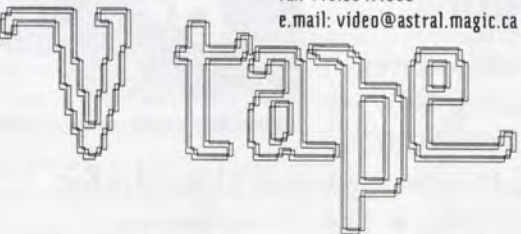

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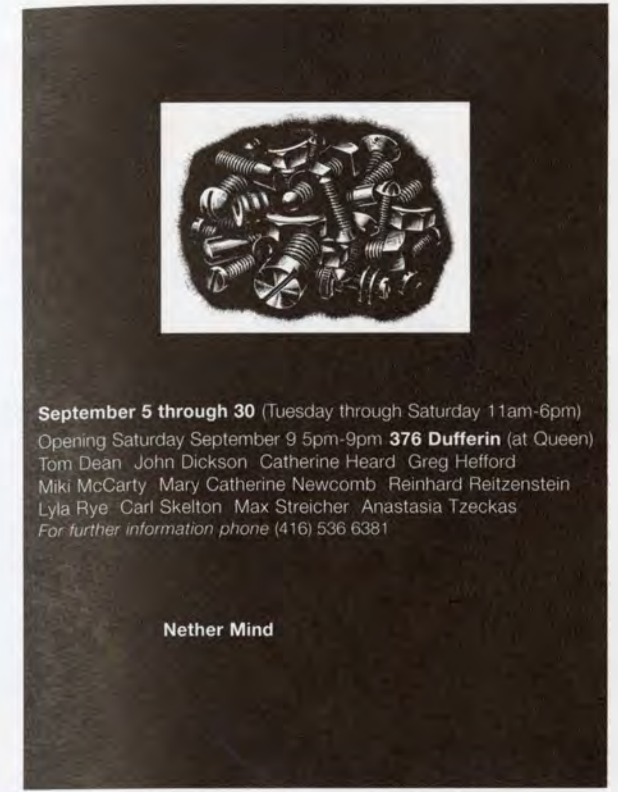

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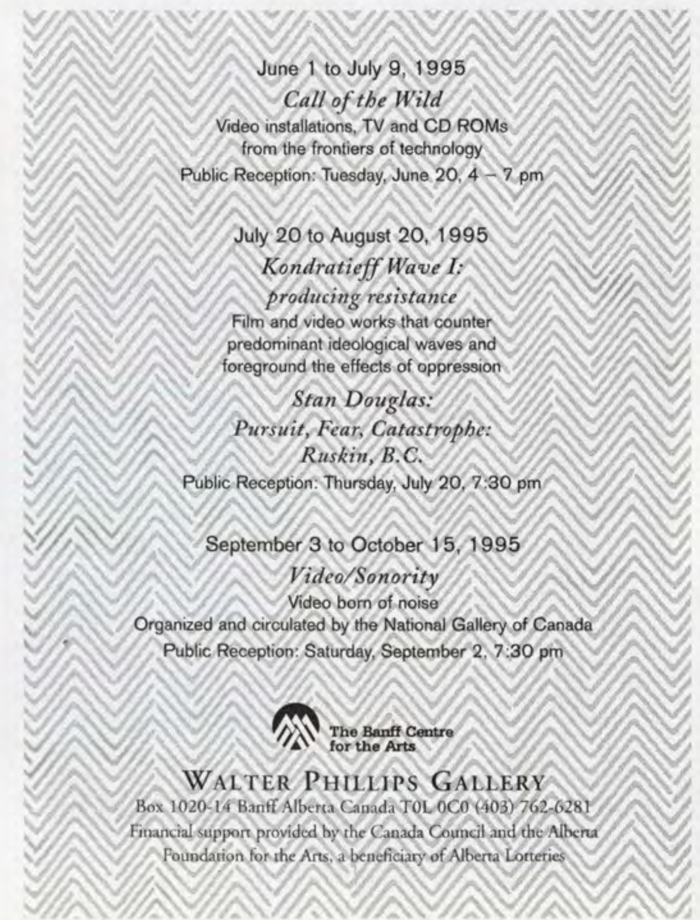

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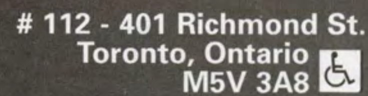

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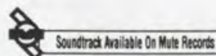

OPENS FRIDAY, AUGUST 11, 1995