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FUSE

MAGAZINE

Pop, Punk and the Culture Industry

by Chris Wodskou



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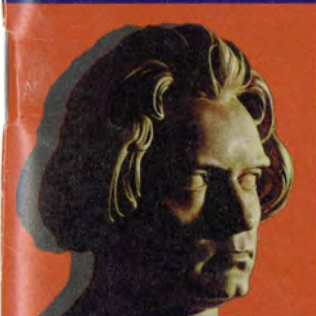
Kill



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The Obscenity Chill Continues

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plus reviews of

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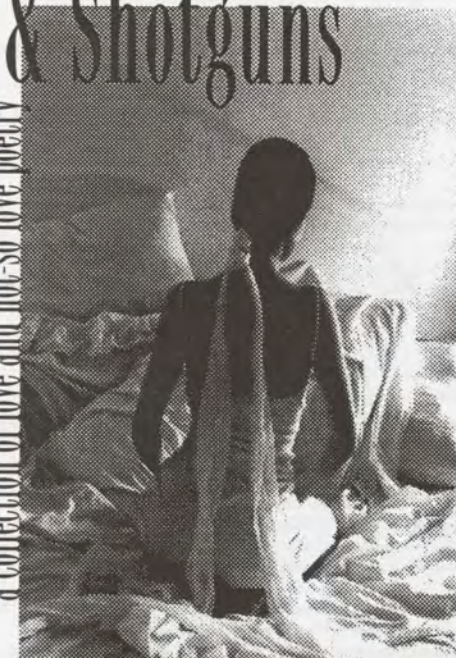
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International Political Prisoners Unite to Save Mumia Abu-Jamal



Art and Writings Against the Death Penalty
This artwork was created by Political Prisoner Marc Rudin



Above: Cover of a popular nineteenth century crime magazine, *The National Police Gazette*, November 15, 1879, depicting tattooing. Elaine Carol's column, beginning p.12, updates the themes of sex, crime and the policing of morality.

Left: public poster project by Partisan Gallery (Toronto, 1995); image by Marc Rudin. See Short FUSE p. 5.

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ARTESTE
DOCUMENTATION CENTRE

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Short FUSE

HURRICANE HARRIS

A "common sense" Conservative wave has swept over Ontario, bringing in its wake the hurricane force of a right-wing agenda that is destroying the social and cultural fabric of Ontario. Among Mike Harris' many targets in his myopic and mean-spirited battering of civil society are the poor, immigrants, gays and lesbians, visible minorities, labour, tenants and artists. Opening the morning newspaper has become an exercise in numbing repetition revealing a litany of cuts to women's shelters, senior's homes, welcome centres for new Canadians, welfare services, museums, arts councils, day care, job creation.... At FUSE, we embrace another kind of "common sense," one that affirms the importance of a social safety net and state funding to the arts as the foundation of economic and culturally diverse and tolerant society. In face of Harris' slash and burn approach to culture, we assert our commitment to providing a platform for the coverage of culturally diverse and progressive visual arts. In so doing, we assert our collective opposition to the dehumanizing and corporate inspired agenda of the Harris Government.

—Board of Directors, Editorial Collective and Staff of FUSE Magazine

IMAGE AND REPRESENTATION, AGAIN

Partisan Gallery on Queen Street West in Toronto was recently host to an exhibition of "Art Against the Death Penalty." There isn't one in Canada, but never mind. There has for some time been a campaign in the United States to televise executions from those states still barbaric enough to do them. Why? As anti-death penalty advocates argue, if people actually see what happens, the case against the death penalty might be more easily made. Never mind

(continued on p. 7)

Letter to the Editors

Name Dropping

Dear Mr. Genosko:
For the most part, I enjoyed your thoughtful and eloquent review of *Hockey Night in Canada: Sports, Identities and Cultural Politics* (by Richard Gruneau and David Whitson, reviewed by Gary Genosko in *FUSE Magazine*, vol. 18, no. 4).

Just one question, though: why did you quote my essay in the *Vancouver Sun*, mention another an *Xtra West* piece I wrote, refer to a *Globe & Mail* article in which I was interviewed, and recall Don Cherry's Queer hockey commentary on "Coach's Corner" without once referring to me by name or telling your readers that I was the sole source and inspiration for all those articles and events? Why was that not worthy of mention?

The second paragraph of your review was frustrating to read. It left the impression that all those articles were written by more than one person, and that coverage of "hockey fans in Canadian gay communities" was entirely the accidental result of sudden mainstream media interest. This is completely inaccurate. The *Globe* would never have done an article unless I had written the previous day's piece in the *Sun* (and two others before that), and Don Cherry wouldn't have replied to my critique if I hadn't made a reference to his "campy wardrobe."

In fact, I was deliberately engaging in what I thought was a fairly ironic, McLuhanesque subversion of the popular

press that should have been worthy of note in a Canadian art magazine. I'm glad you provided visibility for yet another Toronto writer (Brad Walton, whose opera I'd love to see), but gosh it's annoying to be reduced to a mere nameless quote, just because I'm from Vancouver and you've never heard of me. Or was there some other reason?

As Oscar once said, there's only one thing worse than being talked about....

Sincerely,
Daniel Gawthrop

Gary Genosko Replies:

Daniel Gawthrop's exemplary reportage first came to my attention in one of the *Village Voice* Jockbeat columns (August '94) with which I began my review (unfortunately, if *Voice* management had its way, sports coverage would no longer exist in its pages). Gawthrop's mention in *Jockbeat* surely testifies to his international influence in gay sports coverage. Unfortunately I was living abroad during the winter of 1993, the height of Gawthrop's national influence in Canada, and I now welcome the opportunity to read his press clippings which he has so courteously provided. I regret that his name was edited out of the published version by FUSE. While this oversight has nothing to do with inter-urban rivalry between Toronto and Vancouver, the details of Gawthrop's extolling of the beauty of Pavel Bure is a matter, I think, best savoured by Canucks fans.

Thank you Diana!

Diana Bryden has received a grant to pursue independent writing projects and thus is leaving FUSE in her capacity as Administrative Coordinator. We at *FUSE Magazine* would like to take this opportunity to thank Diana for her dedication and commitment to FUSE and all the hard work she has contributed to the magazine. We congratulate her on her writing grant and wish her the best of luck with her future endeavors.



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...Short FUZE

(from p. 5)
that a much ignored study from the early '70s proved, conclusively it would seem to sane minds, that it's no deterrent to murder. Never mind, as well, that the so-called *pro-life* movement sees no contradiction between saving fetuses from abortion and shooting doctors in the back. Denial can be a marvelous force. So can irony. In June, a documentary video entitled *Executions* was released in England, and recently in the United States—not available, by the way, from Blockbuster Video, who refuse to carry it. (Blockbuster financially supports the anti-abortion movement but has no qualms with the death penalty.) *Executions* has a gruesome nine minutes of death-by-execution from all corners of the world and makes a reasoned plea against it. In denouncing the video, Bob Peters of *Morality in Media*—but not, presumably, in life—declared with all the moral outrage he could muster, "It is so repulsive and so obviously sensationalistic and exploitative.... God will be their judge."

TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY ART CRITICISM AT THE GLOBE & MAIL

Picasso scholarship is rife with details of his sexual life and its influence upon his work. His prolific output has, in some accounts, been carved up into periods determined by his romantic dalliances. Imagine the less scholarly endeavor, the biography—an esteemed and resolutely bourgeois enterprise nonetheless—in which his work is subject to a thorough ranging analysis of its merits, and all but neglects the details of his life: his upbringing, his circle of intimates and acquaintances, the sources and milieu of his art. Not a biography then really, but a work of critique, a confusion of genre. What was truly bizarre about *The Globe and Mail's* art editor James Adams' review (*Arts* section, July 8, 1995) of Patricia Morrisroe's biography of artist Robert Mapplethorpe was just that. Adams accused Morrisroe of doing what biographers are supposed to do—*"Mapplethorpe suffers from a surfeit of detail... the wrong kind of detail... lots of gossipy bits and famous names and score-keeping"*—and

of not making a decree upon the aesthetic merits of his work: "Instead of providing a sustained *engagement* with Mapplethorpe's art, she falls back upon 'expertitis'.... Anyone looking for a jumping-off point to evaluate the art of Robert Mapplethorpe is advised to look elsewhere." Oh, thanks James. But wait—aren't biographies supposed to be preening, opinion-citing, name-dropping and gossipy? One gets a sense that Adams is not really a fan of Mapplethorpe. He has searched in vain, but nowhere in these 478 pages is there a pronouncement that Mapplethorpe is really a bad and uninspired artist and all this attention, like that of our own Eli Langer, is obscuring that simple fact. Adams is not, however, like the aforementioned Bob Peters of *Morality in Media*, waiting around for God to judge. He ends his review of Morrisroe's book with sagacious, stern and Jeanne Dixon-esque critique: "fifty years from now, his *oeuvre* won't rank with that of Edward Weston, Walker Evans... future generations will see much of his work as kitsch and curiosities."

—eds.

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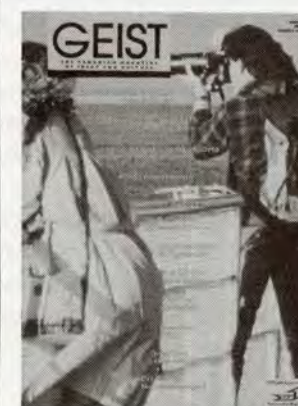
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Film & Video News

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IN SIGHT

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Matt Meagher

Exquisite Collections

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Jan Peacock, curator

corpus loquendi

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by Karen Tisch

THE AILING STATE OF THE ART

As the results of Ontario's provincial election in June hit our TV sets, a collective shudder ran through the media arts community, leaving at least a few Ontario-based filmmakers wondering whether the term "making movies" had suddenly become analogous to "moving south." The announcement of the new Ontario budget confirmed many of our worst fears.

If culture were ever undervalued in our society, it is now. Using the slash and burn tactics promised in their election platform, Michael Harris and his government have cut \$6.5 million from the Ontario Film Development Corporation's funding budget of \$10.9 million. In order to do so, they have had to freeze the Corporation's spending entirely because the \$4.4 million "remaining" in the OFDC pot was already spent or allocated in the early part of the 1995-96 fiscal year.

The scale of this cut completely undermines the OFDC's ability to serve its clientele. In practical terms, it means that the majority of the OFDC's programs are temporarily frozen and some, like the non-theatrical fund, are eliminated entirely. It also means that the Corporation will be unable to accept funding proposals from film or video makers, production companies, festivals or co-ops until at least April 1996.

To add insult to injury, the Ontario Arts Council, which still awaits its allocation, may be in

for a five to twenty-five percent cut. Whatever happens, film and video producers are advised to hold on to their cameras—it is undoubtedly going to be a rocky ride.

ALLIANCE MEMBERS MEET IN ST. JOHN'S

This June, representatives of over fifty independent film and video centres from across Canada met in St. John's, Newfoundland to attend the annual general meeting/conference of the Alliance of Independent Film and Video. Over the course of the five-day event, participants were treated to a six-part national exhibition of independent film and video art (entitled "laugh, I nearly died!"); an engaging series of workshops and panels on such varied topics as producing low-budget features, non-linear editing technologies and artist burn-out prevention; a number of lively ad-hoc discussions at the local drinking hole, the Ship's Inn; and a voyage on the "high seas."

Kudos go to the NIFCO (Newfoundland Independent Film Co-op) steering committee for hosting what was loudly proclaimed as the most vibrant and enjoyable AGM in recent Alliance history. An honourable citation also goes to producer Paul Pope and directors Mike Jones and Velcrow Ripper who headed up an energetic team of AGM participants in producing "Alliance On the March II," a 16mm black and white sequel to a NIFCO/Alliance co-production

shot exactly ten years earlier. Screened on the closing night of the conference, the 1995 film was shot, processed and edited in five days flat.

NIFCO TURNS TWENTY

Coinciding with the Alliance AGM was NIFCO's twentieth anniversary celebration. Created in 1975, out of an act of protest, NIFCO is arguably the most intimate, self-sufficient and animated film co-op in Canada. Over the past twenty years, its members have produced an impressive list of wildly inventive and accomplished films. Highlights include: Mike Jones' *Sisters of the Silver Scalpel*, John Doyle's *Extraordinary Visitor*, Rosemary House's *Subway To Tickle Gut*, Debbie McGhee's *Multiple Choice* and the (almost cult) classic, *The Adventures of Faustus Bidgood* directed by brothers Mike and Andy Jones.

In an introductory essay to a 1990 Images festival retrospective programme, "Neato, It's NIFCO!", curator Gordon Parsons wrote: "Unlike many film groups, NIFCO has not lost its senior members or its sense of outrage. Its work remains vital and uncompromising. Pray they never throw out their 9mm fish-eye lens." As NIFCO enters its third decade, seemingly unscathed by Newfoundland's flagging economy, Parsons' words—and prayer—still ring true.

DIAMOND RECEIVES PRESTIGIOUS AWARD

Congratulations are due to video artist Sarah Diamond, the 1995 recipient of the Bell Canada Award in Video Art. Awarded annually by the Canada Council, this \$10,000 prize honours a video or video installation artist who has made an exceptional contribution to "the advancement of video art in Canada" and "the development of video languages and practices."

A prolific and veteran artist, Diamond is best known for her experimental documentaries which foreground Canadian social histories and the role of women in these histories. Titles include: *Ten Dollars or Nothing!* (1989), *Keeping the Home Fires Burning*, (1988), *The Lull Before the Storm* (1990) and *On To Ottawa* (1992).

In an award ceremony held on June 20 in Banff, Alberta, Diamond joined an illustrious line of past Bell Canada Award winners including: Robert Morin and Lorraine Dufour (1991), Paul Wong (1992), Lisa Steele and Kim Tomczak (1993) and Zacharias Kunuk and Norman Cohen (1994).

ON THE SHELF

FUSE film and video enthusiasts are encouraged to pick up a copy of *Feminisms in the Cinema*, a collection of essays edited by York University faculty members Laura Pietropaolo and Ada Testaferri. Published by Indiana University Press, this rigorous collection features the work of a number of well-known feminist theorists, including Trinh T. Minh-ha, B. Ruby Rich, Laura Mulvey, Judith Mayne and local writers/filmmakers Kaye Armitage and Midi Onodera. The book is divided into four sections: Modes of Identification and Representation; The Role of Fantasy in Lesbian

Representation and Spectatorship; Inscribing Women in Socio-Historical Contexts; and Feminist Film Readings: Personal Politics/Social Politics. Individual essays by twelve writers explore "some aspect of marginality, discussing it as a political strategy and as a challenge to power structures."



Stills from *Influences of My Mother*, Sarah Diamond, video, 1982, 24 min. Distribution: V Tape.

towards an **Arts Policy** in New Brunswick

As a result of FORUM '95, the Government of New Brunswick has received strong recommendations from the province's arts community to create a separate and singular Department of Culture, to form a task force with wide representation from the arts community and government, to develop a provincial arts policy by May 1996 based upon FORUM '95 discussion papers, and to restructure the New Brunswick Arts Board/Conseil des Arts de Nouveau-Brunswick as a proper arms-length organization with its own operating budgets, staff, and increased responsibility for administering juried grants to artists and arts organizations.

In a province with the lowest per capita funding for the arts in Canada, there is no official arts policy and there is no arms-length arts body to administer peer jury granting programs. When the Arts Board started talking over a year ago about organizing a five-year review of the arts community since its creation, there was some doubt about whether the Arts Board with its Arts Branch support staff could effectively do a self-examination. And they cannot do it. They avoided the subject.

In its FORUM '95 pre-conference literature, the New Brunswick Arts Board stated: "the time has come to develop an arts policy that will ensure the protection, development, promotion, and recognition of artists and the arts in the

province." This they thought was the most important area of arts improvement to be addressed. Premier Frank McKenna has said that he feels the government does not have official policy on the arts the way it has in other sectors. This, despite having some form of contemporary arts funding and staff for decades. Yet staff in the Arts Branch state that they have an arts policy. FORUM '95, subtitled, "Towards An Arts Policy for New Brunswick," was the Arts Board's attempt to address this apparent lack at the expense of other concerns.

Over 200 artists and arts administrators attended FORUM '95 in Moncton in late May. Many New Brunswick artists, the author of this article included, did not attend FORUM '95 for reasons including that attendees had to pay registration fees to be there in hopes of having their opinions expressed/counts. To have to pay fees, meals and accommodations, and return travel to Moncton is beyond the reasonable means or imagination of many artists.

Making artists pay registration fees seriously restricts who can participate. This can be seen as a deliberate act. The expense of travel is enough of a deterrent, especially when, from a professional perspective, some feel it would have been desirable to pay all attendant artists consultant fees for this type of policy development work. Arts administrators with institution budgets could more easily afford

to attend FORUM '95. Native artists and young artists were noticeably few in number.

Participants at FORUM '95 ultimately turned the Arts Board's gaze away from the tedious administrative-style point-by-point detail of defining an arts policy and onto examining itself after a day and a half of proceedings. A group of ten artists, including past Arts Board members, took the floor, presented a communiqué, and proceeded to demand that attention be focused on "the big issues" of the role of government in the arts and on addressing the real status and power of the Arts Board.

In December 1986, then premier Richard Hatfield, by order in council, created the Premier's Advisory Committee on the Arts. The committee established two immediate goals: to review existing government programs and to organize a public forum on cultural policy. To this end they sponsored FORUM '87, with more than 350 participants. 1987 was a New Brunswick election year, and the incumbent Conservative government under Hatfield was eliminated by the Liberal sweep of the province and McKenna came to power with no official opposition in the Legislature. The *Final Report* of findings and recommendations was released by Premier McKenna in January 1989. Findings included a wide and

inclusive definition of the arts, the need for long-term planning, the desirability of a single government ministry for the arts that would co-ordinate arts related initiatives throughout the government, and recognition of the arts as valuable industries and that they be funded accordingly.

Since then, the government formed the New Brunswick Arts Board, moved Culture (including the Arts Branch and Heritage) from the Department of Economic Development and Tourism to the new Department of Municipalities, Culture and Housing, allocated the revenue from a scratch lottery ticket for the Arts Development Trust Fund, had the Arts Branch develop the province's first juried arts funding programs, and worked with the federal government to develop and implement a five-year Canada-New Brunswick Co-operation Agreement on Cultural Development, which has since ended.

The Arts Board does not even fill its mandate. While it does meet regularly, prepares reports and recommendations, and presents these to government, Arts Board members are unclear how much attention the government is really paying to them. Because the Arts Board is not arms-length, and does not have its own non-government staff, facilities, or even a separate mail address or phone number, it is rendered invisible and ineffectual within

the larger bureaucracy. Unless one contacts an Arts Board member personally at their home there is no contact or address. This past year the Arts Board resorted to buying ad space in newspapers in an attempt to visibly raise public awareness of issues affecting the arts community.

A key element in the Arts Board's published mandate is to establish and operate a jury system based on a principle of peer evaluation. This they do not do. They do, however, draw up a list of potential jurors recommended from within the community, and hand this list over to an Arts Branch officer who builds juries as needed. The Arts Board does not itself create or administer any juries or juried programs.

The New Brunswick Arts Board should not be confused with the New Brunswick Arts Council, which is not an arts council at all but a performing arts group that tours quartets, the Royal Winnipeg Ballet, celebrated cellists and such through the province. The two do get confused, especially by people looking at New Brunswick from a distance.

The technology job-hungry New Brunswick government is not really seen to be interested in the arts. When they see artists, they see potential workers: digital animation software developers and illustrators, creative writers producing teaching text to be embedded in online web-site help call centres. We are seen to be an exploitable, financially malnourished resource to sell to multinational corporations. Thus the arts development and training programs, including at the community college level, emphasize

Artists are seen to be an exploitable, financially malnourished resource to sell to multinational corporations.

applying computers, information technology and marketing to everything.

The Arts Board, in its too intimate relationship with the government, encourages this. Consultants such as Richard Nolin of 4P, in Moncton, talk of "artistic resources" and "viable industry" and "private enterprise ... invest[ing] in the arts" and a need to "see the artists like partnerships in business" in his desire to separate arts from culture.

Marc Chouinard, president of FORUM '95, talked of not bashing the government, and he put out a call for creation of a Cultural Industry Agency for New Brunswick saying, "The arts are set out in two distinct industry sectors: creative and cultural." From there he proceeded to divide and isolate members of the arts community with disinformation on dollars and programs and goals in his focus on a commercial art product research and development strike force. Such talk alienates most artists because it is not addressing the needs of creators in being creative, or what little they try to live on. Rather it focuses on the economic commercial exploitation of this creativity in the only terms the McKenna government

seems to understand — jobs and marketable products.

Self-motivated artists are seldom seen as "job holders" and obviously cannot be making quality "products" if they have so little income. So the government seems to be welcoming the arts community to set up shop in their technology art farms and factories. Shades of 1920s Soviet state policy, but worse this time because this would not even be working for the state. Artists, for the most part, do not want to become someone else's tools.

Artists want to be recognized as being self-responsible, self-determining. "Artists demanded an arts policy at FORUM '87," says Moncton artist Hélène Laroche, "We got the Arts Board, a jury system.... But that's not enough. We want an Arts Board that's autonomous. Not an advisory board made up of volunteers." Maliseet artist Rocky Paul Wiseman says the Arts Board must have "a mouth as well as teeth," and that First Nations artists must have equal voice on the board.

What the Arts Board does in the wake of FORUM '95 is yet to be seen. At their mid-June Annual General Meeting they presented Paul Duffie, Minister of Municipalities, Culture and Housing for New Brunswick with the recommendations that were generated at FORUM '95. Both the Minister and his deputy minister for cultural affairs, Julian Walker, have stated that they are listening, responding and acting on FORUM '95. What the McKenna government promises and/or does in the wake of their third landslide election within September, will be watched closely.

— Joe Blades

Legend

1. New Brunswick Arts Branch

Department of Municipalities, Culture and Housing, Box 6000, Fredericton NB, E3B 5H1
Phone (506) 453-2555
The government structure for supporting and developing artists and the arts in the province. Has a small dedicated staff doing as best as they can to maintain and develop programs, disseminate information on New Brunswick's artists and the arts and on support possibilities, and process both non-juried and juried grant applications, but they are spread too thin: i.e. one officer handles all visual arts, crafts, film and video; another handles all writing and publishing, music, and theatre.

2. New Brunswick Arts Board/ Conseil des Arts de Nouveau-Brunswick

Box 6000, Fredericton NB, E3B 5H1
A body of artists and cultural development people created by the province in 1989. It exists to: develop policy; to advise the Arts Branch and government on government policies and programs and on concerns raised within the arts community; to develop and maintain a list of qualified jurors for the Arts Branch to draw on; to administer the \$400,000 Arts Development Trust Fund which finances the juried programs of the Arts Branch.

The Arts Board has sixteen artists representing arts disciplines and both official language groups (i.e., literary arts-anglophone and literary arts-franophone are separate board positions). The Board includes three ministerial appointments (from a list drawn up by the Arts Board of people representing the arts community, arts teaching, and one from the Department of Municipalities, Culture and Housing, whom the Board feels will contribute significant expertise).

3. New Brunswick Arts Council

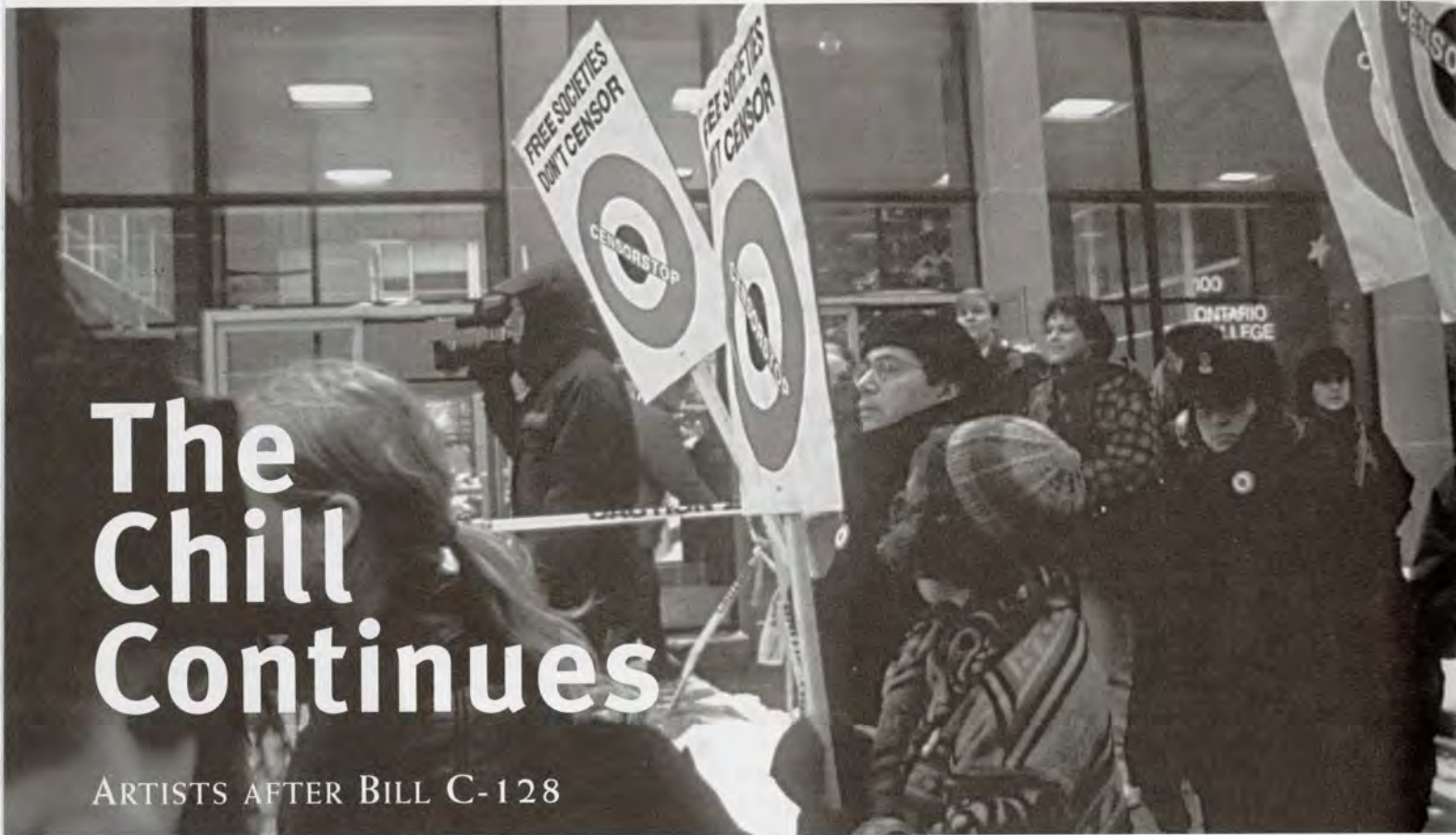
Not an arts council at all but an organization of hosts of performing arts recital tours around the province — particularly performers of classical music and ballet from outside New Brunswick. They express unwillingness to change their name to more accurately represent their function.

4. New Brunswick Arts Foundation

Created in 1995 by the New Brunswick Arts Board (under recommendation from FORUM '87) with the same board membership as the Arts Board. Created to administer a fund being developed from private and corporate donations. The province originally intended to dollar-for-dollar match funds raised but instead has said it will contribute \$500,000 in ten annual \$50,000 amounts. Has the intention of creating and administering its own juried programs for artists and the arts in New Brunswick.

The Chill Continues

ARTISTS AFTER BILL C-128



by Elaine Carol

"The Chill Continues: Artists after Bill C-128" is part one of a two-part column in which Elaine Carol describes the cultural and political fallout of the Supreme Court of Canada's Butler decision (1992) and Bill C-128, the federal Tory government's amendment to the child pornography section of the Criminal Code. Part one looks at the circumstances surrounding the case of Toronto artist Eli Langer. Part two, forthcoming in the winter issue of FUSE, will examine the trial and decision concerning Vancouver bookstore Little Sisters' case against Canada Customs. —eds.

JUDGE MCCOMBS' POSTSCRIPT TO C-128

As I write this column exploring some of my impressions of the youth porn law and its affect on and response by artists, Karla Homolka is finishing her testimony in the bizarre trial of her estranged husband. The video and audio tapes that serve as evidence in the Crown's multimedia case replay the atrocities of the seemingly "normal" St. Catharines couple. These depictions have been labeled child pornography by the mainstream media, as were the bundle of video tapes of gay men engaged in sex that were fished out of the Ausable River, north of London, Ontario, in September 1993, and the paintings and drawings of Eli Langer, the first artist charged in December 1993 under an anti-art, anti-youth and anti-sex law that was engineered by a corrupt, homophobic and panic-stricken Conservative government the previous summer.

We have seen the Langer case reduced to a sensationalized sound bite in the mass media. Though Langer ultimately got his paintings back, and Judge McCombs' decision partially clarifies the murky waters of this cynical piece of legislation, the constitutionality of the law has been upheld. Though many in

the art world view McCombs' ambiguous decision as a victory in the areas of artistic merit and police seizures, it is a mere few steps forward from where artists started with Bill C-128. This is clearly a law scornfully designed to inflame most sensibilities—there are few who would come out publicly in defence of "kiddie-porn." Real child porn snuff videos form the basis of the Crown's case against Paul Bernardo. Bernardo has been charged with a range of crimes, however none of these charges have included child pornography (or the multiple offences of the Scarborough rapist against "under-age" women). In the ultimate of ironic twists in Canadian history, over fifty-five gay men have been snared in the youth porn scare in London.

McCombs' judgment has put a halt to the maneuvers of police officers like the morality squad who promptly carried out a warrantless art heist by closing down and carting away most of Langer's exhibited work at Mercer Union. For the first time in Canada, the decision in Langer's forfeiture hearing removed the discretion from police and put it in the hands of judges who will determine whether a work of art can be removed from an institution. This may only assist those fortunate enough to exhibit in institutions and are recognized as artists by senior professionals. The testimony of Moira Clark, president of the board of Mercer Union, confirmed that only fifteen artists are chosen for exhibitions at the gallery out of 300 submissions every year. Langer is among those rare artists who are privileged to have exhibited in one of Canada's most conservative artist-run centres.

What about the majority of Canadian artists showing in alternative and non/anti-institutional venues? Will Queers who paint, perform, film and write about coming out at age fifteen be protected and defended by the Canadian art establishment as Langer was?

Certainly Queer academics would come to the defence of lesbian and gay artists. Those who have followed Canadian obscenity cases of the past ten years have seen vindictive and homophobic Crown attorneys from across the country attempt, and in some minds succeed, in making out and proud academics into a "vile and perverted" spectacle. In the Little Sisters' trial, I witnessed the dignified testimony of professor Thomas Waugh (an expert in gay film, video, art and literature) reduced to a diluted apology for representations of Queer SM and leather practice by a collection of masochistic Crown attorneys. I have my doubts that the stars of the art establishment who were paraded through McCombs' court would go out on a limb for fag and dyke artists who employ explicit imagery and text as they uncover the complexities of coming of age.

One significant and central point of Langer's defence that was virtually skimmed over in McCombs' decision, ostensibly in the name of protecting children, was the discrepancy between the age of consent law and the youth porn legislation which focuses on representation. Though it is legal for people between the ages of fourteen and eighteen to engage in consensual sex, it remains illegal to make depictions of it. The irony of what surfaced in psychologists Dr. William Marshall and Dr. Howard Barbaree's testimony against Langer's art is that pedophiles will use *any* representations of children to "fuel their sexual fantasies," including boys modeling underwear in the Sears catalogue.

"But in the end," McCombs wrote, "society's interest in protecting children is paramount, and where the safety of children is concerned, community standards of tolerance based on the risk of harm are more important than freedom of expression, no matter how 'fundamental' that freedom may be to a free and democratic society." If the safety and protection of children was truly paramount to Canadian society, the patriarchs of our "community" would be beefing up social services for youth instead of the budgets of morality squads.

The rhetoric of the new right has conveniently appropriated the po-mo legal speak of anti-porn feminism—"women and children need safety and therefore protection from degrading and dehumanizing representations"—and applied it against lesbian and gay culture using Butler and C-128 as their tools. Added to this layer of homophobia is a healthy topping of class oppression. The dykes who produce and write for *Bad Attitude* and the boy hustlers who work the stroll in London or Toronto are easy targets for law-makers, the religious right, corporate elite and the mass media.

There are other class considerations to these obscenity cases. What would happen if Langer had decided to realize his art in a zine rather than in painting, the most conventional of all visual art forms? The fate of Langer is in sharp contrast to that of American Mike Diana, creator of the comic zine *Boiled Angel*. Diana, whose subject matter sounds very similar to Langer's, is currently appealing an obscenity charge. Diana's sentence includes a \$3,000 fine, three years of probation, community service, psychological evaluation and participation in an "ethics in journalism" class. The Florida comic artist was also ordered to stay away from minors and is forbidden to draw. His art and personal papers are subject to warrantless seizures.¹ The scales of justice only serve to confuse representational questions even more for artists as interpretation is a completely subjective matter, even though in obscenity cases one of the jobs of the judge

(or jury) is to determine what "the community will tolerate being exposed to." But whose community are we considering here? Windsor comic artist Mark Carl Caliberte, one of the first post-Butler cases, was acquitted of all charges. His fanzine, in which appropriated famous cartoon characters engage in sexual activity, was found by Judge Nosanchuk to have artistic and literary merit.² Art or porn—who decides? These kinds of laws are rife with ambiguity, illogic, and are open to highly subjective decision-making in which judges draw lines in an attempt to define what is art and what is porn.

It would take another forty-five pages to dissect the full implications of McCombs' postscript to C-128 on lesbians and gay men, artists and sex workers. In analyzing the subtext of his sixty-seven page verdict, I find the good, liberal judge attempting to convince himself of the righteousness of his decision. It seems as though he could not bring himself to tread on mighty constitutional ground and upset the problematic construction of this unscientific test of representation and its speculated risk to youth.

In June 1995 Langer requested permission to appeal McCombs' decision at the Supreme Court of Canada. At this level, a complete and crucial review of the child pornography law could occur. Though Langer has chosen to fight this all the way to the nation's highest court, I cannot help but worry about a Supreme Court who, only a year and a half before Bill C-128, handed down the harms-based Butler decision that is being used by the state primarily and frequently against lesbians and gay men.

Since the Langer bust, there has been an undercover police presence at Queer art events in Toronto. Cops stick out visibly at gatherings of artists; Blue Jays wind-breakers and Tip Top Tailor-ed pants are not what you would expect an appreciator of gay art to be sporting. Morality squad officers are certainly amongst my most loyal following. Andy Fabo believed he noticed two agents at his 1994 opening at Garnet Press Gallery. After the *Kiss & Tell* performance at York University last November, two *uniformed* cops showed up, ostensibly for a "routine check."

After the initial charges were laid, the strong resistance on behalf of Langer organized by artists and activists who phoned, faxed, mailed and demonstrated against the actions of the Metropolitan Toronto Morality Squad and the Crown illustrates the power of organized protest against censoring bodies. Morality squad officers admitted that they never expected the response they got from an art-positive, anti-censorship public. As a result of the protest criminal charges were dropped against Langer and former Mercer Union director Sharon Brooks.

THE CHILL CONTINUES

One chilling incident occurred in the wake of the Langer bust at Mercer Union in September 1994, the same gallery from which police seized Langer's five paintings and thirty-five drawings. This is an example of how state censorship can lead artists and art institutions to self-censorship. Shortly after Langer and Brooks were charged under the youth porn law, representatives from the gallery approached artist Shonagh Adelman to curate a series of exhibitions for the Project Room. The fourth in the series of five exhibitions, entitled "Girly Pictures," was a show of American artist Lutz Bacher's "Sex with Strangers." German-born and Berkeley-based Bacher is an internationally recognized feminist artist whose multi-layered and challenging body of work dates from the mid-1970s to the present.

A few days after the September 17 opening of the exhibition in Mercer Union's new King Street location, Adelman heard rumours of "dis-ease" with Bacher's appropriated and enlarged photographic images of rape and oral sex taken from a 1970s sociology text book. Adelman had written the following in her media release:

While the images appear indistinguishable from conventional porn, the original captions included in the reprinted images would have us read the pictures not in a prurient way but as educational tools.... In Bacher's work, the ironic and tenuous interplay between text and image suggest that sexual pleasure and representations of sex are not safe for women.... Simultaneously provoking experiences of pleasure and danger, "Sex with Strangers" is not safe.

Indeed, though the statement was clear and thoughtful in its contextualization of Bacher's work (unlike the puzzling press release for the Langer exhibition), a representative from Mercer Union fell victim to the chill. Adelman and I spoke in June, after she had time to reflect on a situation in which she felt caught "between a rock and a hard place." She goes on to tell her perspective on the incident:

When I was approached to curate, it seemed that Mercer wanted to send out a pro-active message in response to criticisms coming from the community with regards to their sheepish handling of the Langer situation. It seemed that the board and staff of the gallery had decided to demonstrate that they were not afraid of taking risks vis à vis sexual explicitness. Initially, I made a list of artists and specific work that I wanted to include in the series. Although some of the work deals with the intersection of violence and

sexuality, I assumed that it wasn't going to fall in the morality squad snare because none of the work contained "underage" subjects and the Langer charges specifically premised on the child pornography law. I heard subsequently that when Lutz Bacher's work arrived and was unpacked in the gallery a few days before the opening, there was some apprehension expressed. It annoyed me that, despite the fact that the slides were *thoroughly* previewed, the work provoked concern. If anyone thought there might be "cause for alarm" it should have come up at the point when the slides were previewed.

At the opening on September 17, 1994, I heard that some people had nicknamed the Project Room "the cock and cunt room." What struck me was that the explicitness of the images was overriding the complexity of Bacher's intentions. It was like a Beavis and Butt-Head way of expressing discomfort with sexuality. Then, several days after the opening, I heard a rumour that the exhibition was being taken down. Nobody had contacted me so I assumed that the rumour was completely unfounded.

A panel on censorship had been organized for the evening of September 21 and it wasn't until that morning that someone from the board contacted me to discuss the anxiety that was circulating around the exhibition. It wasn't clear what was being expressed or by whom. The board had been in a meeting all morning. It seemed that there was some fear about the potential for a repeat performance by the morality squad. I couldn't get any decisive answers about potential consequences or the time frame or procedure involved in confiscating work—whether there would be prior warning or not. Brian Greenspan, Mercer's lawyer, had been consulted and, as I was told, his response to a description of the work over the phone confirmed that the work fell under the rubric of the Butler decision—blow jobs might be considered degrading or dehumanizing.³ Aside from this, someone had suggested that one of the women in Bacher's appropriation looked like she might be underage. Despite this "expert" legal opinion, the Mercer board did not want to take the work down. Although they were in a muddle about what to do, there was an agreement at this point to put up a notice at the entrance to the Project Room, indicating something along the lines of—"the work that you are about to see is sexually explicit"—a sort of twilight zone buckle-your-seat-belts cautionary statement. We had done something similar with the first exhibition because Julie Zando's work contains lesbian SM content. Although I didn't like having to do this, it seemed like a small compromise. Shortly after I hung up the phone, I got a second call from a different Mercer representative. The tenor of the

second call was much more agitated—the message I received was that the work could be seized immi- nently without any prior warning. Clearly, there was a lack of communication. As a result of this second call, I felt that I had an obligation to consult the artist and tell her what was going on. If I had knowingly withheld information from the artist and something had happened to the work, I would feel very guilty.⁴ So I called Lutz and told her about the anxiety and the lack of clarity around the situation. Lutz wanted her work taken down and shipped back immediately. I suggested she agree to leave the work up at least until the censorship panel's decision which might shed more light on the likelihood and logistics of seizure. Lutz did not want to take any chances.

In the aftermath of this hypothetical fear, there was a spectrum of responses from the arts community about what would have or wouldn't have happened. One of Mercer's staff told me that a morality squad officer came through the gallery a few days after the work was taken down. Even though they had already gone through this once, they were totally unprepared for what could have happened. In retrospect, I don't think anything would have happened to Bacher's work for several reasons—first, I think it was really so-called "kiddie porn" that they were going after, especially given that there were no problems with Zando's work or the subsequent exhibition of G.B. Jones and A.K. Summers, and second, as Andy Fabo pointed out, because the Langer trial was about to commence and had already provoked a lot of criticism about what was to become a court room comedy of errors. My phone call to Lutz was premature—I should have been a lot more informed about the application or potential application of the Butler decision and morality squad campaign.

The legislation is ambiguous and this has led to a particularly volatile situation because it's left up to interpretation as we have witnessed in the Glad Day and Little Sisters trials. Unfortunately, those who are in positions of legislative power, those who are licensed to interpret images, are not only on the offensive—looking for trouble—they suffer from a seriously depleted brain-cell count—they know fuck-all about contemporary art.

Mercer Union brought on six new board members in the spring of 1995. As well, artist, curator, administrator and Queer activist Kelly McCray, an active member of the Repeal the Youth Porn Law Campaign (RYPL), has been appointed as the new co-director. A smart choice for the job on the Mercer board's part—he is currently playing an ambassador's role to those in the arts community who felt alienated and betrayed by the behaviour of

those at Mercer Union in the Langer and Bacher cases. As McCray says, "Artists don't realize how much or what kind of responsibility is involved in sitting on the board of a centre." Often artists believe that their presence on a board is curatorial or solely for purposes of networking. But board members are accountable for the finances, fundraising and legal matters of a gallery. In the ice age of Butler and C-128, board members of artist-run centres must become familiar with censorship laws and actively resist them. We cannot allow agents of the state to become curators for Canadian art, whether the venue be a large public institution or warehouse space designated as a temporary exhibition or performance space.

**CHILL PILL:
RYPL — ARTISTS & WHORES
WORKIN' IT TOGETHER**

Though former staff and board members of Mercer Union are responsible (some would even say complicit with the police for two reasons: by hiring Brian Greenspan, who frequently represents the Metro Toronto Police, and in not following through with a promise to install blue-prints of Bacher's work in the Project Room after returning the originals) for ignoring Langer during the six months after initial charges were laid and the fiasco of the Lutz Bacher non-exhibition, we must remember that the real enemy in this battle over sexual expression is the state and its erotophobic agents.

RYPL came together in the spring and summer of 1994. A significant and united alliance of Queer

activists, artists and sex workers included Gary Kinsman, Chris Bearchell, Andrew Sorfleet, Matthew McGowan (currently in a court battle fighting charges under the youth porn law), other representatives from Maggie's—the sex workers' safe sex network, artists Andy Fabo, Kelly McCray, Nancy Nicols, Simon Glass, CBC Radio Ideas producer Max Allen, Graham Hollings, lawyer Gerry Hedema and others decided to raise public awareness and support those who had been affected by the homophobic law. This was crucial in the Queer community as *Xtra's* coverage of the Toronto cases had been minimal. RYPL and Maggie's distributed flyers, organized two forums—one that focused on the Toronto cases in June 1994 and another that focused on the London cases in February 1995 that succeeded in educating the public and mass media. This unique coalition of sex workers, activists and artists demonstrates the importance of a united front resisting police harassment, mass media ignorance and state censorship of our communities.

An early RYPL and Maggie's joint project was to connect with Joseph Couture, an activist and investigative journalist who had been exposing the police witch-hunt of gay men in London, Ontario. Sorfleet, who worked with Maggie's at the time, made the initial contact with Couture. Max Allen teamed up with Couture to create an excellent "Ideas" series from CBC Radio entitled "The Trials of London" (it began broadcasting in October 1994) that set the record straight on Chief Fantino and his posse of homophobes.

The historical "Refusing Censorship" conference in November 1992 organized by video and filmmaker

Lisa Steele brought to the fore differences between artists and sex workers that had made it difficult to work in coalition. By June 1993 a meeting I organized between twenty-one anti-censorship feminists and the Women's Legal, Education and Action Fund (LEAF) brought pro-freedom of expression artists, sex workers, booksellers and academics together in alliance against radical feminists' complicity in the construction of the Butler decision. The formation of RYPL cemented the relationship of pro-sex artists and sex workers.

The most exciting art being made today purposely blurs distinctions between high art and popular culture. Queer artists are combining hybrids of art and pornography, literature and fanzine, performance and "live sex arts" in their work. Boundaries are being crossed more swiftly and broadly in sexual expression than at any other time in Canadian art history. The line is being ridden in a more complex way than in the '70s when Robert Markle and Graham Coughtry were fixing their gaze on a het-male-imagined lesbian body. Challenging art, infused with feminism, Queer theory, anti-colonialism and anti-racism can be found on the 'Net as soon as it can be exhibited in a gallery. Though some elements of postmodern thought have made its way into the courtrooms of our nation, often, as we have seen with obscenity laws (which attempt to define material that appears to the visceral) it becomes appropriated and used against "sexual outlaws"—artists, lesbians and gays and sex workers. Conservatives and policymakers need categorization in order to maintain control and the art/porn that refuses to fit into any clearly defined slot will be the work that challenges C-128 and Butler. The Little Sisters case is much more complicated than the Langer, Laliberte or Diana cases because of the wide range of work of many artists, writers, theorists, photographers and pornographers that is being considered under Butler (and perhaps C-128: this will be confirmed after Judge Kenneth J. Smith hands down his decision in September 1995) as opposed to the work of one young artist.

In these slash-and-burn Harris-Klein-Chrétien times, we find ourselves at a crossroads in anti-censorship activism. Artists must connect with others opposing state harassment including anti-racists, anti-fascists and sex workers.

I would like to thank Andy Fabo, Kim Fullerton and Lucinda Johnston for their feedback while researching and writing this article. Thanks also to Shonagh Adelman, Joseph Couture, Brenda Cosman, Kim Kozzi and Kelly McCray for their interviews. Special thanks to Tom Folland and Karlene Mootoo for their encouragement.



Linda's husband engaged in extramarital acts with a waitress in order to satisfy his needs for oral sex forbidden at home.

Single piece from *Sex With Strangers*, Lutz Bacher, photograph and text, 193 x 102 cm, 1986.

The text below the photo is: "Linda's husband engaged in extramarital acts with a waitress in order to satisfy his needs for oral sex forbidden at home."

Elaine Carol is an artist, writer and activist living in Toronto.

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Notes

1. *Censorship News: A Newsletter of the National Coalition Against Censorship*, Issue 1, no. 57, 1995.
2. Claire Barkley and Elaine Carol, "Obscenity Chill: Artists in a Post-Butler Era," *FUSE Magazine*, vol. 16, no. 2, winter 1992, p. 34.
3. In my interview with Kim Kozzi, a board member of Mercer Union, she stated that Butler was never an issue with Lutz Bacher's work, only C-128.
4. It is important to note that Langer's work was held by the Metropolitan Toronto Police for one year and was damaged in storage.



Installation view of *Sex With Strangers*, Lutz Bacher, photographs and text, 193 x 102 cm, 1986.

The captions below each work are, left to right:

"The multiorgasmic male, reported to have engaged in prolonged oral and coital activity, is a great rarity (See H. Ellis)."

"In countless oral adventures some girls are overreacting to a restrictive lifestyle that was imposed on them by parents."

"Multiple oral stimulation was often employed in troilistic arrangements involving the subject, a man and another woman."

"As the guests circled them Nancy began to fellate her host."

Mommy-Daddy-Tommy



In theatre circles Canada already has a *Tommy*: Ken Mitchell's play about Tommy Douglas, founder of the CCF. But this is not the Wheatland Theatre, this is the Elgin in Toronto, restored to accommodate the megaperformances of Mirvish Productions. Goodbye prairie socialism, and welcome to the rock opera of family values. This is The Who's *Tommy* for the anxious '90s.

So much ink has already been spilt about the Canadian stage production, directed by Des McAnuff and starring Tyley Ross as Tommy, that I will not rehearse the history of *Tommy*. Suffice it to say that this *Tommy* is quite unlike Ken Russell's 1975 film version. The story has been intentionally changed by McAnuff and Pete Townsend for the sake of nuclear family values and the big North American mainstream. Townsend is sensitive about what American novelist Brett Easton Ellis has accurately noted about *Tommy*'s new ending: it falls into line with Reaganite family values. In place of the film version's ending, in which Tommy is shown "climb[ing] the mountain" mentioned in the finale, "We're Not Gonna Take It," he now seeks enlightenment by returning home to his mother and father, admitting, "From you I get opinions / From you I get the story." The perfect Oedipal family is reunited: mommy-daddy-Tommy is the triangular shape of

THE THEATRE OF FAMILY VALUES

by Gary Genosko



enlightenment, everybody's little nuclear, and at times, rocky mountain. Townsend is clear about where he stands: "I agree with Nancy Reagan."¹ No number of vintage Townsend expletives could dress down that statement.

As surely as ketchup is a Republican vegetable, *Tommy* and Townsend preach family values. The new ending brings back a grown child to the empty nest; he still can't get his father to open up; his mother still infantilizes him; and no matter how ironically he sings, "Come to my house / Be one of the comfortable people / We're dancing [changed from drinking] all

night / Never sleeping," it's Oedipus once again: he loves his mommy and still doesn't quite know what to do about Dad. You can, it seems, go home again.

In order to set up this ending, the story has to be selectively sanitized. Every time a critic refers to Ken Russell's "failure," something important is lost: Russell's references to British popular culture are almost completely absent in the Canadian and earlier American versions. Not only has the motif of the "holiday camp" as a choice destination for British working class families during the postwar years been downgraded to little importance, but references to The Who's own history have not survived the film. The film scene in which Mrs. Walker finds autoerotic pleasure lolling on her bedroom floor covered in the baked beans spewed from her TV set eroticizes with great mischief a staple of British cuisine, and recalls the cover image of The Who's early album, *Sell Out*, in which Roger Daltry sits in a bathtub full of baked beans. It is one thing to claim that *Tommy* has sold out to North American tastes and another to come to terms with the loss of the cultural references that made it resonate in the first place.

Tommy has also been forced into a linear narrative. The ending has been rewritten, and the beginning has been overwritten. The war imagery drags along despite its pyrotechnics and Captain Walker's surprise return. A new court scene explains that Tommy's father was acquitted of murdering the lover he found in his wife's arms. In general, as the narrative becomes more linear, it also becomes more normalized. Normalization is the overriding motif in this telling of Tommy's life: he will not only be freed from the psycho-physical symptoms (deafness, dumbness, blindness) of the trauma of witnessing the murder of his mother's lover, but his experiences of abuse at the hands of his uncle, his cousin and the acid queen will be de-realized.

Tommy does retain much of its emotional poignancy and refuses to fade away precisely because of the material with which Townsend worked. Scenes of child and young adult abuse are at the centre of the story. These scenes helped to make *Tommy* socially and politically avant garde in the late '60s. But do they keep it relevant today? There has been over the last decade a widespread spectacularization of issues around the abuse of the young in general, from the debates raging around satanic ritual abuse and revelations concerning Catholic children's agencies to the charges against Michael Jackson. In a way, then, *Tommy* opened a space in popular discourse for the revelation of child abuse even though its own representations have been altered.

After witnessing the shooting of his mother's lover, Tommy's parents precipitate his deafness,

blindness and dumbness by repeatedly and loudly insisting, "You didn't hear it / You didn't see it / You won't say nothing to no one."

In the first act, Tommy is held in a psychiatric hospital. He is still only a child when his father, frustrated by his son's disabilities, takes up the seductive solicitations of the pimp or the "hawker" to bring him to the acid queen whose talents are put euphemistically: "Every time she starts to lovin' / She brings eyesight to the blind." The actresses who play the acid queen (Jinky Llamanzares and her understudy, Arlene F. Duncan) cannot be faulted for paying homage to Tina Turner's unforgettable portrayal in Russell's *Tommy*. The scene has changed from Soho sex shop to urban dereliction on the Isle of Dogs, but it's still a *Black Gypsy* prostitute junkie delivering the "treatment," a stereotype-driven doubly othered dose of sexual magic. In Russell's version, Turner had at her command the most remarkable array of apparatuses of the psychedelic-egyptoid imagination. On stage, the acid queen barely lays a hand on the child. This hands-off representation of abuse sets the tone for what follows.

Cousin Kevin is more of a teenage bully than a sadistic proto-punk. Sure, he rolls Tommy around in a garbage can and threatens him. But Kevin also takes Tommy to St. Timothy's Youth Club, which becomes the site of Tommy's encounter with pinball and his first display of innate brilliance. This scene of abuse is subordinate to the narrative explanation of the origin of Tommy's contact with pinball, a matter left to the cultural imagination in the original. The group of "Local Lads and Lasses" who use the club is one of the most successful innovations of the stage version. They are mesmerized by Tommy's playing, as is the minister who pops into the club periodically to police the libidos of the teenage ensemble. The scenes involving the "lads and lasses" are the most dynamic in the first act. The energy generated by the movement of the ensemble around the pinball machine complements the driving force of the songs, "Sensation" and "Pinball Wizard" (both of which will be reprised in Act II), sung by the adult Tommy dressed in his signature white, who leaps upon the machine and enters and exits like Peter Pan.



Ken Russell directing *Tommy*, 1974.



Who's who?

Frank Moore's Uncle Ernie in "Fiddle About" is too full of drunken whimsy to fill in what "fiddling" suggests. The spinning bed in "Fiddle About" is supposed to evoke the abuse Tommy suffers at the hands of his uncle, but it only weakly suggests this because the strong formal or visual effects of spinning evoke equally well movement toward dreams, inner trips and the passage of time. This coding de-realizes the abuse, because what is suggested is that Tommy dreams it or has some kind of "false" experience of it.

In Townsend's original version, the scenes of sexual, emotional and physical abuse were always spectacularly operatic, that is, wildly exaggerated, and

were even more so in Russell's film. And they are still carried out with impunity. But despite the progressive stance of making visible what was hitherto invisible in the life of families and bringing this knowledge into popular culture, there are no repercussions for these acts. Fortunately, Tommy is shown directing some of his anger back at his parents and screams in his uncle's face. There is no resolution, no counselling for either Tommy or his parents equal to the delirious attempts to bring back his sight, hearing and voice. It is sufficient for a musical to make the connection between sexual abuse and institutions, whether they are the family or the church, but this connection is weak, considering the actions of Tommy's parents which precipitated the trauma are not addressed. Instead of questioning family values, Townsend sends Tommy back to where the abuse began.

Let's widen our scope and read *Tommy* against the grain of the normalizing motif of the "cure." *Tommy* is the story of a boy and his machine, a "pinball wizard." The relationship between Tommy and the pinball machine does not need to lead us to identify correspondences between them; nor is the machine a kind of phantasy. Tommy's ability to play pinball is extraordinary because he cannot connect with anything or anyone else, at least not in a way that would convince his parents and doctors that his trauma is not narcissistic. Haven't we heard enough about mirrors and psychology? *Tommy* is drenched with pop mirror games. His mother tolerates neither the libidinal dynamism of his pinball playing nor his fascination with his own reflection.

The scene in which the mirror is smashed is without question one of the most tightly choreographed and theorized. Mrs. Walker smashes the mirror to which Tommy is glued, after having roughly pushed him away from it several times. She uses the chair that was raised in anger by her lover immediately before her husband shoots him very early in the performance. The chair is deposited at the very place on the stage where the murder took place. Tommy goes to the chair and pats the ground around it, looking for the body. Simultaneously, an image of the lover falling backwards is projected on the massive screen at the back of the stage, and as his image falls, it becomes increasingly abstract, until it is no more than a white outline, like those found drawn around a body on the ground at a crime scene. Tommy then launches into "I'm Free," having been liberated from the organic effects of the trauma of having witnessed, at four years of age, this murder. This remarkable scene theatricalizes cathartic method: the source of Tommy's psychical trauma is unwittingly recalled by Mrs. Walker's smashing of the mirror. Tommy relives his

emotional experience of the event and is freed through cathartic regression.

The "table king" thinks Tommy "becomes part of the machine" and even looks like the machine — "he's got crazy flipper fingers." This is no better than the doctor at the research laboratory who tries to "cure" Tommy with several ridiculous little noise-makers that he is supposed to cathect onto because they go bang. Tommy keeps a beat, and his parents are delighted. Such progress! Tommy is unimpressed by the glowing technicolor scanning machine, like the horrid glare of Honest Ed's, into which Tommy is rolled. There is nothing more ridiculous than the doctor's claim that "No machine can give the kind of stimulation/Needed to remove his inner block." On every occasion that Tommy plays pinball, affective intensities pass between him and the machine, to and fro. Where is the block?

Tommy and the pinball machine are completely independent; they are not extensions or projections of one another. This is what allows these heterogeneous elements to form an ensemble on the basis of desire, to separate and reform. Initially, Tommy played pinball without turning it into a performance. Once he is "cured," he begins to shake his shoulders, gyrate and play for pay. In one scene, he rides a souped-up pinball machine which rises, falls, and spins like a bucking bronco. This physical exhibitionism signals that his connection with the machine is weakening. It is not long after he rides the pinball bronco that he finishes with the game altogether. We know it's all over when the theatre itself, in a stunning special effect, becomes a social pinball machine.

Tommy's cure is a kind of psychical normalization for his reinsertion into the institution of the family. With his senses restored, Tommy witnesses the transformation of his closest and most devoted followers, led by Cousin Kevin, into a uniformed private security force. They protect Tommy while he performs, but they also beat the fascinated fan, Sally Simpson. The transformation of these lads into louts is painstakingly choreographed by Wayne Cilento: they lose the individual quiriness of their signature movements, not to mention their good humor, as they assume official roles, and the costume changes along the way by David C. Woolward are meticulous and colour-coded. The short yellow leather jacket and sunglasses worn by Tommy throughout the "Pinball Reprise" scene, as well as his rock star poses, parody, perhaps unintentionally, George Michael. Tommy's white clothing also acquires the undeniable aura of fundamentalism.

Sally Simpson only awkwardly functions as a metonym of the legions of followers who rebel at



the holiday camp against its crass commercialism. "We're Not Gonna Take It," in which disappointment with Tommy's retirement is manifested through none too subtle threats ("We forsake you / Gonna rape you"), has been folded into an extended dialogical sequence. Tommy's interlocutors shift from the abandoned disciples to his parents, as he sings strains of reconciliation and understanding in "See Me, Feel Me" and the finale, "Listening to You (Refrain)." He sings the latter primarily to his parents and relations: "Listening to you I get the music / Gazing at you I get the heat / Following you I climb the mountain / I get excitement at your feet!" This song is an act of submission.

In this revisionist musical of family values, the subordination of metaphysics to home economics deflates Tommy's "amazing journey." Given the clever plot twist of Tommy's self-recognition of the violence borne of his messianic sensationalism, and his withdrawal from the machinery of stardom, his return home pales next to these socially, politically and personally vital insights. To have these culminate in the cliché of a return to the nuclear nest is to drive an otherwise substantial performance into a blind alley of uncritical compromise.

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Note

1. "Tommy Paints the Town," *Maclean's*, 6 March 1995.

A SIGN OF VANDALISM?

Saint-Patrick Street, Montreal
Sunday, September 11, 1994

found object, handsaw
various dimensions



6:00 AM

Land development signs not only serve as a public notice of land for sale, but they also represent a system of economy. Though seemingly democratic and public in their presence, the process behind these signs occurs exclusively within the private domain of corporate structures.

Our destruction of this private property intends to address the question: is the real violation in the collapse of the public sign or in the actual development that will eventually, inevitably take place within the private realm of board room politics?



6:04 AM



KILL KILL LA LA LA

Pop, Punk
and the Culture industry

by Chris Wodskou

I play my la la shit for you every time
La la la la la.

—Velocity Girl, "Pop Loser"

The above epigram is taken from a song by Velocity Girl, a band that plays a hummable and melodic, if noisy, brand of pop. Its melody could easily be transposed onto any number of 1960s girl group recordings by Phil Spector or a syrupy pop/doo wop crossover act from the late '50s. The song really wants it both ways: the melody is almost insipidly catchy, and yet, there are enough hints of discordance to dab the song with sublimated nastiness. Velocity Girl mock pop conventions ("I play my la la shit for you every time") and then feign embarrassment as they affirm and shamelessly deploy one of those consummately mindless pop formulas that must have inspired Theodor Adorno and his fellow Frankfurters with murderous thoughts: "La la la la la." Pop is laughed at and winked at while it is being celebrated. Their critique of pop is situated within the very reactionary form it seeks to undo and eviscerate, and thus to re-animate. Not many would confuse this sort of chirpy pop with the New York Dolls or



the Velvet Underground, but their aesthetic/political projects are remarkably similar: to remove pop/rock from its corporate, homogenizing site of production by reconceiving of it as an oppositional space, not just as a bland, neutral artifact or tuneful propaganda for consumer capitalism. Velocity Girl were also widely written about as a punk band recording for the alternative culture icon, Sub Pop Records, the label that first brought Nirvana to attention. "Pop Loser" is a punk song that sounds like and celebrates pop songs: the pop/punk dialectical engagement. Punk enlivens pop, resists pop, is informed and structured by pop, deconstructs pop, and, as the recent mainstream embrace of grunge and California punk revivalists like Green Day, Rancid, and Bad Religion demonstrates, is ultimately absorbed by pop, except perhaps in its most extreme forms.



The iconoclasts of rock rebellion sell kids a mass-produced sedition, without necessitating leaving the shopping mall

A song like "Pop Loser" also illuminates the relationship between mass culture and a model of popular culture that, in Michele Wallace's words, "still comes from 'the people,' from the bottom up."¹ Operating from within, and in opposition to, the commodity and profit-oriented imperatives of the music industry, independent pop articulates a politics of direct and subversive action in music and walks a tightrope between entrepreneurial capitalism and anti-commodification. Of particular interest are those groups that not only record themselves independently, but that also run record labels whose purpose is not to exploit their rosters for profits, but to ensure that bands can record and release their music without being molded by the dictates of the major labels and music marketplace. The best-known artist-run label is probably Washington, D.C.'s Dischord, run by Fugazi, a conspicuously political hardcore band, whose anti-capitalist sensibilities nevertheless find their most trenchant expression in day-to-day operations: rejection of merchandising, enforcing low prices for their records and CDs, rigidly observed caps on ticket prices and complete control over all its products, ensuring that Dischord bands' music remains their own property.

This do-it-yourself (DIY) ethic is the quintessence of punk and the abiding principle of many independent pop labels: Halifax's prime noisy pop export, Sloan, operates Murderecords as an outlet for unscrubbed East Coast pop and hip hop; The Inbreds, a melodic bass, drums, and vocals outfit from Kingston, Ontario, run PF Records, which has recorded virtually everything from Kingston that isn't the Tragically Hip; Tristan Psionic's Sonic Unyon label has become synonymous with Hamilton, Ontario's now burgeoning indie pop scene; Olympia, Wa., is home to K Records, the brainchild of a minimalist pop band, Beat Happening; Superchunk runs Chapel Hill,

N.C.'s Merge Records; and Arlington, Va., boasts two pop labels that work extensively with each other, sharing both resources and band members: Simple Machines is run by Tsunami, and Teen Beat is the project of Unrest (now Air Miami). Tsunami and Unrest bear strong resemblances to Abba and the lush pop of old Lee Hazelwood/Nancy Sinatra singles as much as to the Sex Pistols and the frenetic post-punk melodies of the Undertones and the Buzzcocks. Yet both Tsunami and Unrest, as well as the other entrepreneurial pop bands listed above, are commonly referred to by fans and critics as punk bands, and concomitantly associated with progressive politics.

These bands don't fit the bill of what is normally considered punk or political. Both play ecstatically tuneful guitar pop, their dress and demeanour are devoid of visual or behavioural punk signifiers, and their lyrics do not overtly address political issues, whether global or local. But DIY is a politics and aesthetic itself, a deliberate flouting of dominant capitalist modes of music production and consumption, and Tsunami's involvement in local political causes and in organizing music festivals and benefits is particularly well known. Of course, some punk purists would argue that smartly and successfully running a business, even if it is an indie label, is as unanarchic and unpunk as you can get, but I would argue that the search for a progressive politics in music, especially popular music, should be an examination of the conditions of production in music; with some exceptions, rock and pop lyrics and publicly disseminated imagery, however ostensibly political, are not necessarily a good barometer of the politics of music and culture. Like John Lennon, many allegedly progressive pop stars only *imagined* no possessions.

There is no accurate means of gauging an artist's relation to the political content of his or her lyrics and music, a problem exacerbated by the commodity nature of popular music. The stance of "authenticity" adopted by such nominally populist stars as Bruce Springsteen and U2 and their politics have not engendered mass political and resistance movements commensurate with their apparent politics. (And how authentic is a working class hero whose nickname is "The Boss" anyway?) For their part, U2's politics are of large, sweeping, messianic gestures, in place of the "Think globally, act locally" motto of local resistances, U2 aspires to act globally and think galactically. As for U2's business practices, they go on pomp-riddled tours and more tellingly, sued a small band, Negativland, for naming an album "U2." Negativland is one of those very bands that relentlessly plays with and demystifies rock ideologies and mythologies of the '60s and '70s omnipotent rock star myths—not an aesthetic strategy that's going to make anyone rich. U2's response to Negativland's critique gives the lie to their own politics. Does U2 really need the money? Or are they just trying to put a smaller band in its place and re-install their own regality? Even if one assumes their good faith, as major moneymakers of the corporate music establishment, their politics are put on the market, and they have little control over the uses that will be made of their music. (One thinks in particular of the Reaganite patriotic misappropriations of Springsteen's anti-Vietnam protest, "Born In The USA.")

Oppositional stances are themselves a lucrative commodity, essential to an iconography of rebellion marketable and appealing to a youthful audience. The iconoclasts of rock rebellion sell kids a mass-produced sedition, without necessitating leaving the shopping mall, or Home Shopping Network: the supposed threat to the social and moral orders posed by Elvis Presley, the Rolling Stones, the Sex Pistols, and Nirvana were integral to their commercial

success, contained and controlled by the very relations of production they were supposed to be subverting, and which in turn normalized and codified subversiveness within a consumerist formation. The romance of the outlaw or rugged individualist has long been deployed by advertisers with the contradictory exhortation to prove your individuality by consuming what they tell you and everybody else to consume.

Noisy, underproduced, but melodic pop, known as "lo-fi," ironically seems in many cases to be the "most punk" insofar as it seems more resistant to commercial co-optation and commodification than acts that are more obviously and visibly punk in their music, appearance and politics. As the indie backlash against groups like Pearl Jam and Green Day (known in the indie press as Pearl Glam and Greed Day) has grumpily argued, grunge and punk (and increasingly hip hop) are now acceptable fodder for both MuchMusic and the Toronto Star, as the mainstream has shifted to assimilate first long-haired males in plaid flannel and now green-haired punks. Lo-fi's resistance, in spite of its often unerring sense of melodic catchiness and pop aesthetics, results largely from the politics inherent in the DIY approach, the very essence of old school punk ideology. Lo-fi bands record cheaply in four-track studios, eschewing the fuller, crisper, cleaner sounds that radio and record labels usually demand; the low budgets also allow the bands and their indie labels to finance themselves and articulate their own sound without the interfering agendas of corporate rock profit margins. They also make a practice of imagelessness, well aware that the hagiography of rock glamour or rebellion, far from challenging social codes and hierarchies, actually re-inscribes them, whether it be Madonna's spectacular self-exploitation or Courtney Love's (of Hole) theatre of self-imposed cruelty. (Love's exhibitionist abjection and brutalization struts a peculiarly grungy sort of glamour, an ecstasy of being as fucked up as possible—not a rejoinder to, but a corollary of, the romance of the boozy, libidinous, drug-addled [usually male] rock star.)

Lo-fi has evolved from a virtue born of necessity into an aesthetic, an ethics and a politics, a signifier for integrity and purity that also breaks down the barriers between the rock star and the fan, since with accessible, cheap four-track studios and a lesser premium on musical virtuosity, anyone with the desire can conceivably cut a record. And this situates lo-fi and independent pop in a position to contest the tendency in Cultural Studies discourse to define the popular as forms of culture that are consumed by "the people," rather than analyzing the sites and modes of cultural production. As a result of this tendency, the term "popular culture" is highly problematic one, so vaguely defined and generally applied as to be all but meaningless. The spurious and specious distinctions between high and low cultures and between Culture and popular culture have been widely challenged as social and political constructs, but simply analyzing culture through patterns of consumption is inadequate in discerning the popular. Beethoven, for example, is normatively seen as Culture, while Nirvana is viewed as popular culture, yet surely far more people could hum a few bars of the Fifth Symphony than "Smells Like Teen Spirit." Both are mass cultural products having little to do with a popularly produced culture.

Popular culture theorist John Fiske differentiates between cultural commodities and the uses made of them and the meanings created from them by active cultural consumers, arguing that popular culture is produced by the people in so far as their uses and readings of cultural commodities are productive and subversive: even in the act of consumption, the true cultural producers

...the limit of ironic consumption is that, to paraphrase Slavoj Zizek paraphrasing Marx, they know it's crap, but they're still watching it

are the people.² Academics and pundits alike have taken this dictum to heart, as evinced by the ever-expanding Cultural Studies shelves in hip bookshops bearing a plethora of book-length studies of TV shows, movie stars, pulp fiction, and musicians. It is questionable, though, whether refocusing attention on such cultural commodities as soap operas or Michael Jackson records, however they are consumed, is in any way a gesture toward cultural egalitarianism, since they are products of vast multinationals. In fact, the sense of agency Fiske ascribes to the cultural consumer, as if consumerism is an inherently subversive practice, seems to be an overcompensatory corrective to the Frankfurt School's bleak jeremiads about mass culture. North Americans may claim to be watching Partridge Family reruns and Beverly Hills 90210 ironically, but the limit of ironic consumption is that, to paraphrase Slavoj Zizek paraphrasing Marx, they know it's crap, but they're still watching it—while the producers of said crap are lining their pockets with cash and getting license to produce more of the same to be further consumed, ironically or not. Much of the Cultural Studies industry lacks radicalism, a sense of history and populist politics and a healthy suspicion of commercial cultural production, leading to an uncritical reification of mass cultural products: actual university courses called "Madonna Studies" and "The Films of Keanu Reeves" institutionalize a culture and politics of consumption, not necessarily invalid in and of itself, but certainly not satisfactory in theorizing popular culture. Rather, the elevation and celebration of what passes for popular culture is often motivated less by radically democratic sentiments than by desperate careerism. After all, Cultural Studies courses tend to be on Madonna and Michael Jackson, not independent music labels or other small, local resistance cultures. This industry resembles

nothing so much as *New Grub Street*, as academics search frantically for new readings of any mass-consumed text, so as to maximize their own consumer base, eliciting responses ranging from "Well, I'll be damned, so Don Cherry's Coach's Corner is a Socratic dialogue" to "Well, duhhh!"

The Cultural Studies industry is suspiciously complicitous with the culture industry, engaged in the academic and journalistic fetishism and reification of mass cultural commodities, especially where popular music is concerned, since academics seem to incessantly flog their Madonna theses, but remain clueless about Guided By Voices, The Pharcyde or Aphex Twin—how much credibility would an academic writing film articles have if he or she wrote exclusively about Steven Spielberg and never heard of Kieslowski or Egoyan? This approach ultimately doubles as an apologia for the multibillion-dollar culture industry, giving mass-produced entertainment an aura of worthiness in the face of Theodor Adorno's vilifications of popular music as an ideological stun gun. Adorno's attacks on popular music as a cultural jackboot enforcing the ossification of critical faculties may be unintentionally amusing in their apocalyptic hyperbole, but a cursory analysis of the relations of popular music production and marketing at major labels and radio stations suggests that popular music indeed "aims at standardized reactions, and its success—notably its adherents' fierce aversion to anything different—proves that it has gained its end. It is not only the interested parties, the producers and distributors of pop music, who manipulate the way it will be heard; it is the music itself, so to speak, its immanent character. It sets up a system of conditioned reflexes in its victim."³

The rock theorist Greil Marcus would agree thus far: with the expansion of leisure time in this century, popular music became increasingly a program of banality and monochromatic sameness, limiting the possibility of responses and inculcating listeners with middle class values of love,

family, narcissism, and wholesome fun attained through consumerism. The spectrum of mainstream popular music in the entire post-World War II era is marked by its cheerful blandness and its love-conquers-all ideology passed off as universal experience and normative dreams, leading to the false identification of popular music consumers with the aspirations and protagonists of the music, consuming, a utopia of consumerism and passivity and inoculating themselves against critical reflection. The consumerist subtext of pop is only the putting into pop's content the conditions of its production, as Simon Frith exhaustively documents in *The Sociology of Rock*, the mass production of rock and pop was geared toward tapping the emergent consumer group of young people in the '50s, the era in which teenagers first began to have substantial amounts of disposable income, containing and administering their leisure. The resultant "hit-making machines" were just that—machines—and still give added resonance to Walter Benjamin's phrase, "art in the age of mechanical reproduction." To Adorno, the pop song is characterized by its standardization: "pop melodies and lyrics must stick to an unmercifully rigid pattern" that reproduces the song itself *ad infinitum*, structurally, lyrically, and thematically, and also reproduces production, consumption, and profit patterns.⁴ Even the creative revolt and political ferment of '60s rock was contained and defused by an oligopoly of major labels assuming control over production and distribution, effectively deciding who would and would not have access to an audience and what that audience would hear.⁵

There are, however, gross limitations with critiques that see in pop only a form of state-administered thought control. They do not see past the music industry aspect to envision popular appropriations for subversive ends, and they do not entertain the possibility of disruptions to the music industry apparatus that some forms of punk and hip hop represent. Adorno et al. make no differentiation between potentially different uses and means of production of cultural forms, that Tsunami is not the same as Madonna, or that for all their musical similarities, there's a big difference between The Carpenters and Unrest. Bands like Tsunami and Unrest, not to mention more obvious examples like the Sex Pistols and Public Enemy, effect ruptures in the placid surface of cultural production, however much their songs may resemble the apparently "false consciousness" propagations of mainstream pop. We need to distinguish between the effects and politics of mass-produced culture and popularly produced culture, not just to read cultural commodities as objective or self-referential texts, but to examine the sites and modes of cultural production and dissemination. Stuart Hall theorizes the popular as a contradictory space and the site of struggle. Popular culture appropriates, subverts or accedes to received cultural forms, while dominant cultures attempt to co-opt and reintegrate popular disruptiveness into its cultural production:

The meaning of a cultural form and its place or position in the cultural field is *not* inscribed in its form. Nor is its position fixed once and forever. This year's radical symbol or slogan will be neutralized into next year's fashion; the year after, it will be the object of profound nostalgia.... What matters is *not* the



intrinsic or historically fixed objects of culture, but the state of play in cultural relations: to put it bluntly and in an oversimplified form—what counts is the class struggle in and over culture.⁶

For Michele Wallace, the popular is identified "by the ruptures it creates: not only its various ways of breaking with capitalist production—which becomes more and more difficult to do—but also by its ability to superimpose, upon the commercialism of one of the mass cultural forms, another agenda concerning 'the people.'"⁷

If one accepts Walter Benjamin's directive—"Rather than ask, 'What is the attitude of a work to the relations of production of its time?' I should like to ask, 'What is its position in them?'"⁸—as a guideline in locating a popular politics of culture, one would be drawn to independent pop labels which make the means of production accessible to those normally excluded from the music industry, and in so doing, help to break down the hierarchical barriers between the producers and consumers in popular music, which are so instrumental in the reification and mystification of pop stars. Conceiving of the politics of the popular in this way also explains the apparent contradictions between the self-consciously revolutionary music of the '60s being defused as "classic rock" or feelgood nostalgia for grown-up baby boomers seeking existential affirmation in their midlife crises, U2 becoming the soundtrack for countless frat parties and erstwhile punks playing huge tours to teenagers buying concert tickets on their parents' credit cards, while small labels specializing in melodic pop have spearheaded local social movements, instigated changes in day-to-day social relations and effected at least local ruptures in the fabric of cultural production.

While the containment of '60s countercultural music by the major label establishment kept it from achieving its utopian post-capitalist aspirations, the punk explosion of the late '70s was the radical break in cultural production that Adorno could not foresee. While Adorno sees pop as having a consensual, pacifying effect on its consumers, the utter banality of mass-produced rock and pop, and their attendant ideology of the exalted pop star, are actually what goaded many punks into taking matters into their own hands. Punks appropriated the means of production, found new uses for music aside from exchangeable commodities and engaged in a negative aesthetics and epistemology aimed squarely at the musical establishment and its vulgar complacency and smugness. Punk tore down the bloated excesses of rock spectacle and glamour, demystified the iconography of the pop star, mocked "cock rock" and laughed insolently at the pretensions of progressive rock. But punk, in addition to being a classic example of the subversive appropriation of a mass cultural form in using "rock 'n' roll as a weapon against itself,"⁹ also, in its bull-in-a-china-shop fashion, sought the transformation of all social relations: "if one could show that rock 'n' roll, by the mid-1970s ideologically empowered as the ruling exception to the humdrum conduct of social life, had become simply the shiniest cog in the established order, then a demystification of rock 'n' roll might lead to a demystification of social life."¹⁰ Assuming control over cultural production amounted to a breach in the relations of everyday life in the social world of capitalist economies.

The recent highly publicized wave of nominal punk—the grunge scene, the Seattle scene, the Sub-Pop label, and such bands as Nirvana, Soundgarden, Sonic Youth, Tool and Smashing Pumpkins—was commodified by the music and fashion industries with alarming speed once the media got wind of it, and before long, a rock movement that began as a trenchant effort to bring noise and loud crunchy guitars back to a slumbering rock scene, found itself a staple of *Spin*, *Details*, and *The Gap*. Prefabricated responses to grunge like Stone Temple Pilots wasted little time in cashing in on a momentarily lucrative sound and sold millions. The recent media blitz over Kurt Cobain's suicide as the sacrificial rock hero for a generation of slackers and twentysomethings further shows the extent to which a movement that could spawn a record label called Kill Rock Stars could be enfolded into the commercial rock mythos itself. Furthermore, as it has come under the wings of the major labels, who went on a Seattle feeding frenzy after Nirvana's success, whatever oppositional ethic grunge might have posed before—anti-machismo, anti-sexism, anti-corporate rock trappings and glamour—has been defused to the point where bands embodying all such negative rock trappings—baring their chests, grabbing their crotches and sounding like Led Zeppelin at every opportunity—have been sold as grunge by dint of being loud, stylishly unkempt and maybe having a body piercing or two.

Nipping at the heels of grunge, too, has been the phenomenal success of neo-punk, whose ground zero is California's Epitaph label. The irony behind getting rich off reviving an anti-capitalist movement that rejected outright all nostalgia is self-evident, but the success of Green Day et al. is proof of how countercultural poses of seemingly marginal pop and rock stars create new forms of identity that can then be assumed through continued and specified consumption: "If audience can be persuaded that a precise style, genre, artist or image meets their needs, expresses the solution to their particular leisure problem, then not only is



Is there a more cynically absurdist situation than capitalists appropriating apparently anti-capitalist culture, and selling it back to apparent anti-capitalists?

their commercial exploitation made easier, but rock's disturbing and challenging and instructive elements are transformed into the easy confirmations of well established conventions.¹¹ Punk, in its grunge and California formations, has become an attitude of boutique rebellion that a savvy reading of loosely subcultural consumer guides like *Spin*, *Details*, and *Sassy* enables. "I was shopping all day—it was so punk." Or to paraphrase Billy Bragg, the revolution is just an overshrunk T-shirt away.

Can punk be popular and still be political, punk, and *popular*? Is there a more cynically absurdist situation than capitalists appropriating apparently anti-capitalist culture, and selling it back to apparent anti-capitalists? When control over the marketing, production, image and positioning of music shifts from the local and independent to mass production, the hegemonic imperatives of mass culture reify the new counter-cultural commodity and thus, their own mode of production. As if in response to the ways in which the punk and the counter-cultural have been divested of their radicalism, independent pop bands have appropriated an already thoroughly commodified form and has countercolonized it, turned it against itself.

John Fiske refers to popular culture processes as the "art of being in between," making use of "their products for our purposes,"¹² and this is exactly the social, aesthetic, and political project of independent pop: it expropriates pop from its "proper" uses and refigures it in a transgressive, empowering and pleasure-producing economy of self-production. In spite of the limitations of Fiske's theory of popular culture, his use of the term "excorporation" is very helpful in the study of indie pop and its relation to popular culture, especially since it suggests that the most creative form of consumption is a (re)production:

"Excorporation is the process by which the subordinate make their own culture out of the resources and commodities provided by the dominant system."¹³ "Pop Loser," the song discussed at the outset, is both an affirmation and negation of pop; to paraphrase Greg Tate, it vexes the pop song, plays on its formal and lyrical conventions to voice what the pop song normally excludes or silences. Toronto's Katrocket's recent single, "Mr. Clean's 12 Step Program," is a gorgeous pop song about ethnic cleansing and the terroristic rape of Bosnian women—a pure pop song, but definitely not "just a pop song." Indie pop's disruptions of the commodity form and uses of pop, as well as the irruptions of noise, amateurish playing, or low-tech production techniques into the otherwise glossy sheen of mass-produced pop, suggest a Bakhtinian model of popular culture: a dialogic relation between pop forms and punk aesthetics and ethics, between the low and the lower (as opposed to the high and the low), between the reified commodity and the counterdiscourse that undermines commodification.

I don't want to suggest that popular production of culture takes place exclusively within the indie pop—or punk—communities, nor that this formation is anything more than a historically specific moment of finite length; punk epistemology, after all, is one of impermanence and fleetingness, guerrilla attacks on oppressive structures, not the formation of traditions. Moreover, the hegemonic struggles Hall writes about ensure that if indie pop is to have much of a cultural impact, it will no doubt be absorbed by the major labels, and those with the do-it-yourself impulse will look for new forms to plunder—most notably techno, ambient and trip hop in 1995.¹⁴ But it's tempting to think that indie pop may be more resistant to commercial co-optation than its punk cousins; it's more difficult to envision a deviant or dangerous pop subculture and turn it into a marketable sign of counterculture or individualism. Malcolm McLaren, who, as mastermind of the Sex Pistols, oversaw and witnessed their transgressions and commodification, states that the challenge is to redefine deviance: "The notion of 'bad' is affixed to Michael Jackson today. But if you don't want to be like Michael Jackson, you've got to look 'good' and make that sound subversive."¹⁵ Many alternative music fans admit to their liking groups like *cub*, *Jale*, or *Unrest* as guilty pleasures, and in this light, indie pop is possibly more subversive than punk since it is a veiled and insidious, a smiling, la la-ing sneak attack upon social assumptions and cultural relations. The Sex Pistols and the Dead Kennedys were so notorious as to be household names even among those who hadn't bought a record in years; deviance, subversion, and treason were expected of them. But who's going to be suspicious of genre called "cuddlcore" and bands with names like *cub*? As Jenny Toomey of *Tsunami* puts it, "You can't judge a band by the way it sounds. That's a lesson K Records taught us: the politics aren't necessarily in the lyrics," but in the processes behind the production and distribution. Mark Robinson of *Unrest/Air Miami* concurs, drawing further the relation between punk and indie pop as being one of a do-it-yourself politic: "It's not in the music, but in the attitude. It's the do-it-yourself approach that makes it punk. If you're in a band, don't be hung up on other people putting out your stuff. Take control of it yourself."

Like punk, indie pop's privileging of the amateur over the professional extends to production techniques: if the song is good, it can be effectively recorded cheaply without overdubs or twenty-four tracks and on less than state-of-the-art equipment; low-tech, unintimidating to the novice and

inexpensive, a three-chord, simple pop song presents fewer barriers to anyone who simply wants to play or record a record. Furthermore, unless one is a technique fetishist, pop is relatively easy to play—as an old punk fanzine used to say, "Here's three chords. Now go start a band." It's no coincidence that the aesthetic of choice in indie circles is lo-fi: not only is it more accessible since it utilizes simple musical forms, low-tech recording and cheap equipment, but the sometimes muddy, sometimes murky sound of lo-fi pop has come to be a marker of indie authenticity. The sound of the music itself bears the residue of its material conditions of production; economic, social and cultural formations are embedded in the very texture of the music. It's not so much anomalous as logical, then, that so many lo-fi groups are attracted to the blues. PJ Harvey, the Jon Spencer Blues Explosion, Beck, Vancouver's *Superconductor*, and the "sludgeabilly" group, *Deja Voodoo*, the no-fi duo who ran *Og Records* out of Montreal in the '80s, have all plumbed the depths of noisy, unvarnished blues, well aware that the authenticity of blues recordings is still often gauged by the amount of crackle, hiss and surface noise—when CD reissues of old masters like Robert Johnson are released, promoters takes pains to show that the CDs don't sound like CDs.

Indie pop is largely about empowerment—smaller centres like Chapel Hill, Olympia, and Halifax have developed vibrant and fertile scenes in resistance to top-down, centralized modes of corporate music dissemination, and more significantly, the rise of indie pop has also seen the increased participation of women. Whether it's due to the non-sexist atmosphere of indie labels, indie pop's disavowal of rockist machismo or simply the relative absence of oily record company executives, all or mostly women bands like *Tiger Trap*, *Bratmobile* and *Lois* in the U.S. and *Krevis*, *cub*, *Bite*, *Jale*, *Fifth Column* and *Venus Cures All* in Canada have emerged, playing tuneful guitar-based pop of varying degrees of aggression and noisiness; the politics, again, are not necessarily in the lyrics, but in the very act of taking up guitars and becoming musical agents in a traditionally masculinized domain. Far from fostering a generation of layabout slackers who would drain our middle class of its nest eggs so they can sleep until noon and tinker with a four-track recorder, that sense of musical agency has created a subculture of lo-fi workaholics. They know they can do it themselves, so they do, whether they're *Lou Barlow* of *Sebadoh* compulsively recording at his home and releasing countless records under a plethora of names or *Tristan Psionic* trying to run a record label, arrange shows around *Hamilton*, and record and tour themselves. If they worked half as much for a major label, they could carp about taxes like everyone else; as it is, today's political culture would probably take one look at their balance sheet, see that they are clearly not fueling the nation's economic engine, and soberly conclude that a little workfare would teach them the value of a real day's (barely paid) work.

Significantly, the forum for indie pop is campus and community radio, which operates on a non-profit basis; the music is programmed for pleasurable ends, not to sell advertising. More radically, indie pop labels have formed co-operative networks, such as *Positive Force*, which distributes a photocopied handbook called "You Can Do It" for forming bands, recording and producing records, playing shows and organizing benefit concerts. As the title suggests, the indie pop potlatch is about accessibility. It is the space where local activism, local politics and local aesthetics conflate and blur the boundaries between production and consumption, at least for now.

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Notes

1. Michele Wallace, *Invisibility Blues: From Pop To Theory*, (New York: Verso, 1990), p. 112.
2. John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 25.
3. Theodor Adorno, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), p. 29.
4. Adorno, *ibid.*, p. 26.
5. Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 42.
6. Stuart Hall, "Notes On Deconstructing 'The Popular,'" *People's History and Socialist Theory*, ed. Raphael Samuel, (London: Routledge, 1981), p. 235.
7. Wallace, *op. cit.*, p. 112.
8. Walter Benjamin, "The Artist As Producer," *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, (Boston: Godine, 1984), p. 298.
9. Marcus, *op. cit.*, p. 57.
10. Marcus, *op. cit.*, p. 56.
11. Simon Frith, *The Sociology of Rock*, (London: Constable, 1978), p. 208.
12. Fiske, *op. cit.*, p. 36.
13. Fiske, *op. cit.*, p. 15.
14. Hall, *op. cit.*, p. 238.
15. Malcolm McLaren et al., "Punk And History," *Discourses: Conversations in Postmodern Art and Culture*, ed. Russell Ferguson et al., (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990), p. 244.

AIDS BOOGIE WOOGIE

General Idea: Infe@tions, 1994

S.L. SIMPSON, TORONTO
JUNE 1–JULY 4, 1995

REVIEW BY ROBERT W.G. LEE

"Forget what can be done within the museum's walls. Develop the means to facilitate and support cultural practices where they are urgently needed, where they will have an effect, where they will save lives."¹ Douglas Crimp's writing was part of a call to action of the American AIDS activist movement during the late '80s. It was a movement that demanded of artists a discursive practice that contested mainstream representations of AIDS and favoured the public realm, believed to be more "democratic," over the museum. Implicit within this activist stance is an inherent critique of aesthetic responses to AIDS and an argument that truly relevant responses were ones located outside the museum's walls. The (art)work of activist groups like Gran Fury, for example, foregrounded function over form, and rejected modernist notions of aesthetic transcendence, believing that the power of art lay in its ability to spur social action.

In Canada, due in part to our more socialized system of health care, the way that AIDS has been experienced here has differed from the situation in the United States, and the artwork produced here in response to the epidemic has reflected that difference. The Canadian collective General Idea began their *AIDS Project* in 1987, at a time when activist groups were beginning to organize against government inaction and problematic news media coverage. The urgent militancy of late '80s activism has substantially cooled under the weight of an epidemic now in its fourteenth year. General Idea's latest exhibition, *Infe@tions*, the last of

new works done before the deaths from AIDS-related causes of General Idea partners Felix Partz and Jorge Zontal in 1994, provides an opportunity to evaluate the relationship of recent art and activism in the context of AIDS.

For *Infe@tions*, General Idea revisited the works of Modernist purists Piet Mondrian, Gerrit Reitveld, and Ad Reinhart. The blue, red and yellow colour scheme used by Mondrian and other Neo-Plasticists was reinvented by General Idea to echo the blue, red and green of their original AIDS painting. The *Infe@ted Mondrian* paintings recreate some of the Dutch painter's most famous works, such as *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, but replaces Mondrian's yellow with bright green, a colour Mondrian disliked so much he would sit with his back to the window to avoid a view of the trees. General Idea's version of the famous Reitveld Chair continues the metaphor of infection, similarly altering the assumed purity of Reitveld's colour scheme.

In this exhibition, General Idea's *Fin de Siècle AIDS* wallpaper is used as a dazzling backdrop to the new paintings. The word AIDS appears to reproduce itself on the gallery wall, creating an almost uncontrolled play of blue, red and green. The now iconic AIDS logo, styled after Robert Indiana's *LOVE* painting, was first produced in 1987 for AmFAR's Art Against AIDS charity fundraiser in New York. The logo has been used by General Idea and other groups on everything from postage stamps and electronic billboards, to gallery walls and subway posters around the world. It was General Idea's hope that

they would, in the words of A.A. Bronson, "lose control" of the image and it would spread like a virus.

The potential for a broader reading of General Idea's AIDS work comes not only through the context in which the work is situated, but also through some of its formal strategies. General Idea's formal technique of repetition speaks of magnitude. This serves to expand a reading of their AIDS work into a broader social and political context pointing to the magnitude of loss that makes AIDS a crisis. The metaphor of infection goes further than just the Mondrian and Reitveld pieces. The kaleidoscopic repetition of the AIDS wallpaper spoke of the spiraling infection rates of a brutal epidemic. The *AIDS Project*, continually reproducing itself and appearing in yet another location, has achieved the status of ubiquitous "Imagevirus" as planned by its creators.

Infe@tions, like General Idea's earlier AIDS pieces, challenges the viewer to evaluate their relationship to the work. The message of General Idea's earlier three-part *Pla@ebo* exhibition series, again using the blue, red and green colours carried of the first AIDS work, was ambiguous. The viewers of each *Pla@ebo* exhibition were confronted by three very large capsules which sat on the floor together with a wall installation of eighty-one capsules in combinations of blue, red and green. As Louise Dompierre writes, the work avoided a didactic address and placed an emphasis on the viewer, instead of the artists, to find an answer: "In emphasizing the absence of a cure, *Pla@ebo* places



us, as viewers or as victims, in the centre, with no means of escape. Whatever our relationship to AIDS might be, we are implicated."²

This overwhelming or all-consuming sense can also be felt in General Idea's installation of *One Year of AZT*. Purchased by the National Gallery earlier this year, *One Year of AZT* surrounds the viewer with 1,825 white and blue AZT capsules on the four walls of the room the installation occupies. A group of five much larger capsules on the floor echoes the fifty-two groupings of five capsules on the wall. Entitled *One day of AZT*, the five coffin-sized floor capsules, together with *One Year of AZT*, are a striking statement about the place such medication can occupy in the life of someone with HIV or AIDS. Although *One Year of AZT* is cool and unsentimental, the installation locates the personal within a much larger context in a manner reminiscent of the AIDS Quilt, which further underscores a feeling of magnitude.

The minimalist tone of *One Year of AZT* is also found in the *Infe@tions* show in the group of six hauntingly beautiful black-

on-black AIDS paintings. In these works, the green that has infected the other works has turned to black. This take on Ad Reinhart's black paintings of the early '60s is more somber than the colourful wallpaper, suggesting a darker result of infection. Accompanying the show is a book produced by General Idea entitled *CC Voto (for the Spirit of Miss General Idea)*. The edition of 900 signed and numbered books, published jointly by the S.L. Simpson Gallery and Galerie René Blouin (Montreal), were finished before the deaths of Partz and Zontal in 1994. As their last publication, this satirical "devotional prayer book" has a melancholy air about it:

We 3 thank you!... Miss General Idea, muse of all impossible and hopeless causes... we plead with you to allow all the works that you so graciously permit us to forge as General Idea be beautiful always and forever, delightful and gay always.... May you allow we 3 to live forever with you, together in your world of art, always, always, always.

If we are to take to heart Crimp's claim that "art does have the power to save lives," then surely we cannot "forget what can be done within the museum's walls."

The witty, flippant, and sometimes ominous works that comprise General Idea's AIDS project confront the viewer with an unsettling sense that for now, the pervasive AIDS image, like the pandemic itself, just won't go away. Perhaps the strength of the series comes through the reminder of the difficulty we face in confronting a helplessness in the face of rising infection rates and drugs that offer no cure. As viewers of the work, it is easy to want the work to do something. Like the ubiquitous red ribbon, perhaps what General Idea's AIDS work demands is that the viewer do something.

Notes

1. Douglas Crimp, "The Museum Walls Reconsidered: Or How to Have Art in an Epidemic," *The Art of Exhibiting in the Eighties*, Evelyn Beer and Riew de Leeuw, eds., (Grvenhage: SDU/Rijksdienst Beeldendekunst, 1989), p. 286.
2. Louise Dompierre, "Towards the 'Fin de Siècle,'" exhibition catalogue for *Fin de Siècle*, (Stuttgart: Wurttembergischer, 1992) p. 58.

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Installation view at the S.L. Simpson Gallery, Toronto, 1995. A group of seven *Infe@ted Mondrian* paintings mounted on silkscreened AIDS wallpaper, with the *Infe@ted Rietveld* chair. Photo: Peter McCallum.

NOT HOLDING STILL

AlterNative

MARY ANNE BARKHOUSE, PATRICIA DEADMAN, MARIANNE NICOLSON, SHELLEY NIRO, ARTHUR RENWICK, GREG STAATS AND JEFF THOMAS

CURATED BY LYNN HILL

THE MCMICHAEL CANADIAN ART COLLECTION, JUNE 3–AUGUST 6, 1995

REVIEW BY CAROLINE STEVENS

The post-colonial critic James Clifford once said "Cultures do not hold still for their portraits."¹ Indeed temporality is crucial to the concept of cultures. In the exhibition "AlterNative" curator Lynn Hill has brought together seven contemporary First Nations artists to address notions of identity, community and the environment through photo-based works. Repeatedly, the question invoked by the exhibition is not what is culture, but, when is culture?

Each artist in "AlterNative" explores photography as a diverse medium for the creation of contemporary imagery. In the catalogue that accompanies "AlterNative," Hill sites Edward S. Curtis' twenty volumes of photogravures and twenty-three volumes of illustrated text that are representations of *The North American Indian*. Images like Curtis' have played a large part in constructing the commonly held idea of "Indian-ness." "AlterNative" surmounts these limited constructions and creates new signifying systems, if not a new semiotic field of representation. This change is a positive one and long overdue. Within the exhibition stereotypical and colonial discourses are purged and replaced with new, non-static systems for understanding identity, community, and culture.

Throughout the exhibition systemic issues and concepts of colonialism are exposed. Patricia Deadman's *Serve Series* explores the colonial conception of time. The series is comprised of five large black and white

duratran prints, *Conserve, Preserve, Reserve, Deserve, and Self Serve*, all which address the institutional desire to contain and control time. *Conserve* depicts a heavily forested conservation area. To conserve is to keep from harm or decay, to protect from loss or being used up, to keep in original form. Beside it is *Reserve*, which

depicts a Plains-style "teepee," and is indicative of the popular misconception of reserves and the people who live there. Read together, the two works can be viewed as representing the artificial control that has been exercised over First Nations people and questioning the discursive motivations of those controls. To



The Requickening Address, Greg Staats, silver gelatin print, oil, wampum and deerhide on davy board, 1995. Text: "Relieve the twisting within the body." Photo courtesy of the artist.



Nam'sgams/Malt'sams, Marianne Nicolson, mixed-media, 1994. Left: front view of centre panel; right: back view. Photo courtesy the artist.

chest of drawers. Their inclusion can be read as the demise of the colonial ruler, and the healing of those communities previously ruled. It is within the space of this healing that new identities and communities can be created.

Although much of the work in "AlterNative" deals with the ideas of identity and culture on a communal basis, some of the artists have chosen to explore the idea of community from an individual perspective. Shelley Niro's *Are You My Sister?* series encompasses twelve panels with images of the artist's shadow, her mother, daughter, friends, artists from other First Nations communities, and of the environment. At the end of the series is an absent sister, or rather a space waiting to be filled, signifying that the artist's community is not a closed one, but one that is perpetually growing. The portraits are all in warm sepia tone and are framed by rich copper plating into which the artist has engraved a unifying floral pattern. The work attests to how identity is formed by those who surround us and our environment.

One of the dangers in an exhibition such as "AlterNative" is the possibility of reconstructing stereotypes through their deconstruction. Every time a stereotype is invoked, even if that invocation is ironic, there is no control on how such an image will be consumed. Homi K. Bhabha has stated that the point of intervention should shift from the identification of images as positive or negative to an understanding of the processes of subjectification.² "AlterNative" for the most part has resisted the urge to merely re-invent through deconstruction, stereotypes, (the work of Jeff Thomas and his representation of the "nameless" Iroquois on the Place d'Armes monument in Montreal, however, rapidly falls prey to misinterpretation), and has addressed the systems of subjectification that give them their

conserve or reserve culture is an impossibility; it is in perpetual motion. To deny this motion whether through restrictive legislation or artistic representation is to construct a deleterious artifice. In case the point has been missed, Deadman includes a more didactic message in *Self-Serve*, a self-portrait taken at a self-serve gas station. In it Deadman is standing beside a car wearing a T-shirt with the logo "Indian — Genuine Parts and Service."

Situating First Nations culture in a perpetually moving present is a central theme of "AlterNative." Part of that contemporality is the resurrection or remembering of a past that years of colonial and governmental restrictions have buried. Greg Staats in *The Requickening Address* depicts visually the Haudenosaunne Confederacy, an Iroquois condolence ceremony. The work is comprised of fifteen photo assemblages, each made up of a black and white photograph and strings of wampum similar to those used in the traditional condolence ceremony. The ceremony and the work attest to the notion of healing.

Although the majority of images in *The Requickening Address* are from the environment — water, rocks, trees — Staats has also incorporated the human, perhaps colonial presence through an old chair, a burnt piece of wood from a church on the Six Nations Reserve, and an old forgotten



power. Systems such as patriarchy, colonialism, language, "documentary" photography, and indeed time, are themselves deconstructed through the works in the exhibition. They are deconstructed both through their content, that which the artists chose to represent, and their form, the way in which each of the artists has manipulated the medium of photography to keep it from representing culture as timeless. But "AlterNative" goes a step beyond. It avoids the nihilistic tendency of deconstruction and replaces it with a new signifying system, one that can encompass the temporality of "culture."

Notes

1. Clifford, James, *The Predicament of Culture*, (Cambridge & London: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 10.
2. Bhabha, Homi K., "The Other Question: Difference, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism," Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Cornel West, eds., *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Culture*, (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), p. 71.

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THE CONNECTIVE TISSUE OF ASIANESS

Asian Heritage Month

TORONTO
MAY 1995

REVIEW BY INDU SINGH

Although the idea of "Asianess" was the connective tissue that tied the various events of this year's Asian Heritage Month festival together, the exploration of personal identity provided the central theme of the festival. From the cultural homage of Brenda Joy Lem's shrine retreats to the experimental punk sensibilities of Midi Onodera's films, the featured music, dance, film and art betrayed hybrid sensibilities of Eastern and Western experience. Happily absent was the nostalgic obsession with the "old country" that pervade other well meaning "multicultural" events.

The most obvious way that this May-long celebration, now in its second year, departed from traditional multicultural events was in its political content. Thirty or so events spanned the spectrum of contemporary culture, politics and art and challenged our assumptions about what it means to be Asian Canadian. Panel discussions covered issues ranging from racism, migrant labour, art and the role of culture on gender and sexuality, while the evening programmes such as "Laundry Women, Dragon Ladies & other exotic Oriental Girls" featured work which was both flamboyant and political, including several works by Asian lesbians with titles such as *Eating Mango* and *Skydyking*.

Two works that demonstrated different approaches to racial politics were a documentary by Fuad Chowdhury, *Hear What We Are Saying*, and Midi Onodera's *Displaced View*. *Hear What We Are Saying*

explores the impact of racism and sexism in the mental health system on women of colour, and is the best effort on this subject I have seen. The personal testimony of the women featured in the film, both the ones on the receiving and on the giving end of community mental health projects were truly inspiring.

In *Displaced View*, a film chronicling Japanese internment in the '30s and '40s, Midi Onodera makes the decision not to translate her grandmother's narration from Japanese to English. (The testimony of various other Japanese speakers was translated). Onodera hopes to evoke viewer sympathy for her non-English speaking grandmother's plight during the years of her internment, but by blocking the most important testimony in the film, Onodera leaves a serious gap in *Displaced View*.

While many of the aims of the festival's working committee, such as fostering co-operation between the various Asian artistic communities, were duly realized, it was obvious that their goal of "promoting... dialogue and understanding between different generations [of Asian Canadians]" was not as successful. The attendance of older audience members was limited to events that were more traditional in form and content, such as the enchanting performance of the *George Gao Silk Ensemble* and the kathak virtuosity of Salina Ahmed Jharna. Aside from the energetic youths who bopped to the bhangra-funk of *Punjabi By Nature* at the Bamboo (scarcely aware of the

attempt to raise their cultural consciousness) the age of most other festival goers fell within the range of twenty to thirty.

The attempt of this Asian Heritage Month committee to bridge this generation gap is not a trivial preoccupation. Although Asian Canadians are geographically removed from Asia, we are nevertheless connected to our heritage via our parents and through the cultural legacies of previous generations. And this link pervades our daily life in nontrivial ways. This fact was poignantly illustrated by three talented poets, Steve Pereira, Ritz Chow and Hiromi Goto (whose first book of poetry, *A Chorus of Mushrooms*, has just been released by Newest Press) in a reading sponsored by the National Association of Japanese Canadians.

For those of us who are children of the Asian Diaspora, and for whom growing up in Canada has been a musical chairs game of cultural inclusion and exclusion, the Asian Heritage Month Festival provides an important cultural "space." There are those like Neil Bissoondath who might consider this type of exploration an act of self-indulgence, but as the "Writing Thru Race" controversy last year proved, this "space" is not always easy to come by.

Indu Singh recently graduated from the University of Toronto with a degree in Chinese Language and Literature & Russian Language and Literature. She is a freelance writer who lives in Toronto.

NOT JUST A PRETTY FACE

Corpus Loquendi: Body for Speaking

BODY-CENTRED VIDEO IN HALIFAX 1972-82.
CURATED BY JAN PEACOCK. ORGANIZED BY DALHOUSIE ART GALLERY.
OAKVILLE GALLERIES MAY 13-JULY 3, 1995, TRAVELING

REVIEW BY STEVE REINKE

"Corpus Loquendi: Body for Speaking," curated by Jan Peacock, is a traveling exhibition of thirteen videos curated by Jan Peacock. Despite the show's title, the place of the survey is not really Halifax, but the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, which, at that time, was situated about midway between Halifax and Manhattan. And the period surveyed is not really an entire decade: ten of the tapes were produced between 1972 and 1976, nothing for the rest of the '70s, then three tapes — a sort of addendum — from the early eighties.

When I was a student at NSCAD a few years ago I had a job transferring the school's collection of 3/4" video to vhs. This included a lot of work produced at the college, "vintage video" made with a porta-pak and single-tube black-and-white camera. (Probably some other student had transferred the same works from reel-to-reel a decade earlier.) In general, I would watch the first few minutes of each tape and then do something else, glancing occasionally at the monitor to make sure the dubs were okay. Although I've always had a soft spot for work produced at this time (early to mid-'70s) it seemed to be work that didn't generally warrant — or even expect — to be sat through in its entirety.

So I came to this exhibition with definite expectations. I had seen (all the way through and paying attention) five of the works and probably dubbed another five. I thought the show would be interesting as an historical survey, but didn't expect

to get excited about or engaged by most of the tapes.

So coming across the thirteen works in "Corpus Loquendi" has been something of a revelation. This is partly because of the exemplary job Jan Peacock has done in preparing the catalogue materials. Most of the credit however has to go to the high quality of the individual tapes. I admit I was something of a snob: I expected the four tapes by famous American artists — works that have entered the tenuous canon of video art — to be the high points of the show. Although, of course, I don't like all thirteen tapes equally, each one is incredibly strong. But this is a short review, so I'm not going to talk about the famous tapes (Vito Acconci's *The Red Tapes*, Dara Birnbaum's *Pop-Pop-Video*, Dan Graham's *Past/Future Split Attention*, Martha Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen*). I also won't be able to discuss another two of the tapes for the same reason: (Dorit Cypis' *Exploring Comfort*, Eric Cameron's *Numb Bares*) or Peacock's curatorial essay.

The earliest tape is Doug Waterman's *Shuffle*. Although Peacock refers to it as a classic of early conceptual video work, I'd never heard of it. The performer repeats a simple action for the duration of the reel (thirty minutes): he scrapes his feet on the carpet building up a charge of static electricity. He then leans down and touches the bare tape on a reel-to-reel recording the action. The electricity de-magnetizes the tape causing a burst of snow, though on playback this snow occurs before he



Top to bottom:

Numb Bares II, Eric Cameron, B/W, 1976, 10 min.

48-Hour Beauty Blitz, Wendy Geller, colour, 1982, 38 min.

Plato Non-A, Ed Slopek, colour, 1981, 22 min.



Shuffle, Douglas Waterman, B/W, 1971, 30 min.

bends over to touch the tape. Alternatingly boring and mesmerizing, the snowy blips take on a significance far outweighing their clearly delineated cause. Peacock describes it more poetically: "...a body reaches out to affect the future trace that it leaves in the world." Another work of Waterman's that deserves to be a classic — if it isn't already — is described in the catalogue. It's an exhibition called *Room temperature adjusted to body temperature* in which the temperature of the gallery was maintained at 98.7°F for the exhibition's duration.

Three works by Martha Wilson are also performance-based. Two of them follow a structure whose economy and directness I can appreciate: she gives a little monologue saying what she's going to do, and then she does it. "In early June 1972 I captured the soul of Richards Jarden in a colour photograph. As soon as I ingest the photograph I will recover the identity that was drained from me in the past and we will be of equal power." And then she proceeds, methodically and without apparent concern for the toxicity, to eat the photograph piece by piece. Her final work is called *I make myself up in the image of perfection, I make myself up in the image of deformity*, in which she applies make-up to bring out her worst features, slowly transforming her face into a grotesquerie.

Wendy Geller credits Martha Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen* as influencing her own *48-Hour Beauty Blitz*, but this performance for the camera also reminds me of Martha Wilson's tape. With deadpan fury Geller documents herself undergoing the instructions in *Glamour* magazine for a week-end home spa. I know it sounds boringly straight-forward and pedantic, but it's sharply funny as Geller plays through her doubled role as woman-wanting-to-be-beautiful and feminist analyst/consumer advocate, or, as Peacock says, "both researcher and lab rat."

I have an on-again off-again relationship with the work of pioneer video artist David Askevold. Perhaps to a greater extent than any other Canadian videomaker his work is unrelentingly, elliptically experimental. Many of them are strange diffuse works — nebulously authored — in which memory exists as the obfuscation of desire. *My Recall of an Imprint from a Hypothetical Jungle* is one of the easier ones to engage with. The visual elements are obscure — you can't tell what you are looking at, but it shifts around like some animal landscape. The voice-over is one of Askevold's — and for that matter all the second-generation conceptualists' — first forays into what was soon to be called story art. It's the story (which Askevold re-constructs from a conversation on a train with two newly returned Vietnam vets) and Askevold's increasingly ominous delivery that gives *My Recall* its considerable visceral power.

Ian Murray's *Nova Boetia-Another World*, made in 1976, marks the end of the single-take performance-for-the-camera works. (It's always seemed strange to me that once technology becomes available to artists they must use it, even if it means completely switching the type of work they used to do. At any rate, as soon as editing equipment became available, the majority of work produced was conceived to need editing. Yesterday's single-take performances were out.) Murray interviews a young academic whose obsession with *Another World* interferes with her teaching duties (ethics, Dalhousie

University). The raw interview material is interesting, but it's Murray's interventions — which still manage to look slick — that push the work into examining a cycle of authored/mediated subjects.

In *Susan*, Susan Britton presents herself as the (self)-authored/mediated subject. In this mock-umentary Britton profiles herself as a prostitute. Although the gesture of taking on a persona in video is a common one, Britton's performance is so compelling and clever I find myself watching this video over and over again (well, three times).

Also compellingly addictive is Ed Slopek's *Plato Non-A*. According to the artist the tape "reproduces the clinical conditions necessary to test for the critical thresholds at which flashing lights are able to induce epileptic seizures." The artist (an epileptic) is seen being subjected to varying strobe-light frequencies. The resulting document of his reactions is a vivid chronicle of facial contortions, agitations, and shudders uncontrollably triggered by light." In the video it appears that Slopek is watching TV with a strange stubborn willfulness, unable to tear himself away despite the deleterious effects of such extended viewing. But then, you'd probably not look much different if you were to view Slopek's tape, particularly if you'd also just seen the other compelling and often brilliant works in "Corpus Loquendi: Body for Speaking."

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

WHAT'S LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT?

The Fifth Annual Lesbian and Gay Film and Video Festival of Toronto

PRESENTED BY INSIDE/OUT

METROPOLITAN CINEMA, JACKMAN HALL (ART GALLERY OF ONTARIO), TULLULAH'S CABARET (BUDDIES IN BAD TIMES THEATRE)

MAY 18-28, 1995

REVIEW BY RANDI SPIRES

The fifth annual Toronto Lesbian and Gay Film and Video Festival has come and gone. With over 160 individual works, ranging in length from one minute to over an hour, it was inevitably eclectic in both form and content. Lesbian and gay film and videomakers are too diverse in background and vigorous in sensibility to be pinned down to any one set of subjects or styles. Herein follows a discussion of several of the works presented, the selection being entirely idiosyncratic.

Remember the Lesbian Chic fad that hit the mainstream media a couple of years ago? Suddenly all of those periodicals and television newsmagazines that in the two decades plus since Stonewall could barely manage to choke out the "L-word" were doing feature stories on the gay women of America. *Glamour*, *Newsweek*, *New York Magazine* and *20/20*, among others, pronounced us flavour of the month and just as quickly forgot about us. What did we expect — ongoing and in-depth coverage?

The problem wasn't only that we were portrayed so rarely in the mainstream media but that even when they did depict us they didn't get it right. Taking your cue from the Lesbian Chic mill you might come to the conclusion that most lesbians are white, monogamous, liberal-minded, affluent, high spending, witty, well-accessorized paragons (of what I'm not sure).

Our human susceptibility to the media and the false images they present to us is

the subject of *Nice*, a video by Toronto artists Jane Farrow and Kelly O'Brien. In this often very funny piece, a self-described "lesbian geek" feels ugly, lonely and preternaturally poor compared with her chic media cousins. Maybe if she has a makeover and acquires all the right accessories she will suddenly earn a higher income and develop a sparkling social presence.

As she arises from her mattress-on-the-floor bed (no antique fourposter here) and scrambles into her usual attire — checked shirt and goofy toque — she muses about the newly respectable image of lesbians in the media. She no longer feels restricted to being an "ordinary dirt dyke." She now feels she has the potential to be "nice." As she goes about trying to acquire all the right stuff (more in the line of metal than mettle) including a designer body in a trendy gym, even her sexual fantasies are focused on media figures.

But geekiness dies hard. All those high income, free-spirited, free-spending households are a marketer's dream. First, they help sell magazines (or television shows); then they help sell the junk that's advertised in them. You can only buy so

much respectability. The true attitude of the media is probably reflected, Freudian fashion, in the fictional programs mentioned by our chick geek. The kiss — lip service really — between Roseanne Barr and Mariel Hemingway was one thing.



Still from Gerald Hannon's *Time, Hub?*, a segment of Nik Sheehan's feature film *Symposium*, 16mm, (1996), 90 min. Photo: Duo Photography.

More telling was the "Beverly Hills 90210" episode in which the lone lesbian character became horribly disfigured in a disco fire. Was this plot turn necessary? Only if you think the real disfigurement is being a lesbian.

Lesbian. Geek. Chic. These are all simply labels, categories. No single slot can contain any person. We are all a jumble of often contradictory and frequently

changing classifications. The construction of categories, their mutability and political significance are among the concerns explored in Zoe Newman's *Designing the Body*. Newman is a Jewish lesbian who has not always been at ease with these facets of her identity. For a long time, she says, she was closeted both as a lesbian and as a Jew, passing with apparent ease as a straight gentile. In reclaiming these aspects of herself she has had to refashion both those categories so that they become more inclusive designations.

For instance, she remains solidly dyke-identified even as she retains a traditional feminine appearance. The Jewish part is tougher. For one thing she is only half-Jewish making her suspect to some on both sides of the equation. Newman has taken back her Jewishness but on her own feminist terms. She handles a mezuzah with suitable reverence but is also seen wearing a prayer shawl — traditionally reserved for adult males. For a woman and someone whose Jewishness is "suspect," this represents a transgression meant to disrupt and remake categories.

While Newman's Jewishness and lesbianism are not immediately evident, written on the body so to speak, her whiteness and femaleness are. As a teenager Newman was eating-disordered, trying to starve her body into submission to an impossibly skinny cultural ideal. In doing this, she says, she subjected her body to "a version of the same abuses of conformity, docility, anonymity, obedience, at a great price, that ruling bodies have heaped on foreign bodies century after century." Newman recognizes her white-skin privilege but draws connections between the agonizing and self-destructive experiences forced on female and non-white bodies.

Identity, if I read Newman right, is a potpourri of overlapping and interacting

categories. It's dynamic, not something written in stone, and it must be worked at whether one wants to stabilize the mask or totally reconfigure it. As Newman concludes: "[A]s far as I'm concerned being any gender is a drag," i.e., a dress-up, a performance. And, as every actor knows, no two performances are exactly the same. However, as fluid as these renditions are, they are marked not only on the external body but also in the heart and in the bone.

Ask twenty different people "What is love?" and you will likely get twenty disparate answers, each one revealing in its own way. *Symposium*, a twelve-part film by Toronto filmmaker Nik Sheehan (only three segments were shown at the festival) asks that impossible question. It begins with the premise that a filmmaker named Adrian has sent a copy of Plato's *Symposium* to each of twelve friends. Their replies are presented to us one by one.

Playwright Brad Fraser's segment was the most visually simple of the three. He sits naked on a bed accompanied by a nervous Nik Sheehan, also bare from the waist up (the nudity referencing the vulnerability essential for genuine love). Fraser dismisses the grand idea of love — you know, the one where you meet that special somebody and spend the rest of your life in conjugal contentment — as a myth perpetuated by straight white guys who want to keep the world under their control. It may well be a myth but one that cannot be easily dismissed. Lots of people have internalized it and keep striving to achieve it time and time again. Just as obviously, it's not for everyone. Fraser talks of love freely given and received. For him, love is mysterious. It changes form as one develops from decade to decade and it can come and go in an instant.

Gerald Hannon, in the second segment, speaks of love for sale. Hannon discusses love from the point of view of a prostitute.

It's a one-way affair where he becomes the love object. He never reciprocates the feeling and never abandons the strictures of a set time, a set place and a set fee. Yet he feels that in this process, for both him and his customers, time temporarily stands still and life's narrow boundaries are stretched ever so little.

It seems a very romanticized view of prostitution, with little relation to the reality of street hustlers of either sex. I have no idea whether this is a fantasy, an autobiographical piece or a metaphor for the difficulty of true mutual connection. In any event, Hannon has set himself up as the proverbial hooker with a heart of gold, long a staple of heterosexual literary and cinematic convention. The client we see him servicing is a hot young stud who would not look out of place in a gay male porn flick. What about the homely, the cranky and the unwashed? Would they, too, pleasantly stretch out the hours of Hannon's life?

The third segment is a fable about exalted love between a teenager and an older man that begins with the boy being picked up in a schoolyard. Here presenter Sky Gilbert is obviously tweaking the noses of those who, in the name of child abuse prevention, would deny all sexual contact between teenagers and their elders. But the boy is presented here as a young man, not a child. There is no coercion or even much persuasion. More like love at first sight.

But what Gilbert is really onto is a celebration of love as self-sacrifice, a warrior's love, a love that ultimately eroticizes violence. When Gilbert proclaims that all armies are essentially gay and that gays make the best and most loyal soldiers, he is being facetious (I think). But there is truth in this. The intense male-bonding characteristic of both the military and team sports is distinctly homoerotic. Gilbert would have these erotic bonds

become more overtly homosexual. Fair enough. But when he lauds the act of war itself he loses it. The glorification of violence and war whether in the name of fatherland, political ideology, brotherly love or anything else can only needlessly increase the suffering of a world already awash in physical and psychological pain and ecological destruction. Unlike Gilbert, I can imagine a world without war, and contrary to what Gilbert opines, it would not be boring.

And now, an elegy. *Black Is...Black Ain't*, the last film by the late, great Black American filmmaker Marlon Riggs, was a sad highlight of the festival. Riggs died in the spring of 1994. In this film we see him in his sick bed, commenting on his relationship with nature, the history of Black American music and many other things. Besides Riggs, the film features interviews with people ranging from a clear-headed Angela Davis to African cultural essentialists, all commenting on the nature of Black identity. The range of attitudes is as huge as one would logically expect it to be.

What is evident here is an artist, already recognizably great, on the verge of a significant expansion of his vision, just as Malcolm X was when he was assassinated. *Tongues Untied* celebrated, most wonderfully, the culture and spirit of Black gay men. But it was criticized for positioning Black gay men as the ultimate transgressors of the white-dominated heterosexist hegemony, thereby obliterating the meaning and power of Black lesbian resistance. *Black Is...Black Ain't* is more inclusive, articulating — and not uncritically — the multiplicity of Black identities in all their joyousness and contradictions.

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WE'RE HERE, WE'RE QUEER ... AND WE'RE MAKING MOVIES

Out On Screen: Lesbian and Gay Film/Video Festival

CAPRICE THEATRE, EMILY CARR INSTITUTE OF ART AND DESIGN, PACIFIC CINEMATHEQUE, VIDEO IN VANCOUVER
JUNE 1-11, 1995

REVIEW BY KAREN X. TULCHINSKY

Vancouver's Lesbian and Gay Film/Video Festival, "Out On Screen," now in its seventh year, offered twenty-four programs in eleven days. More than half the works screened were by women — a major feat considering the huge gender disparity in film/video production, a direct result of women's economic disadvantage.

Inclusion, diversity and accessibility may have been the greatest strengths of the festival. The opening night screening presented two feature length films. *Under Heat*, starring Lee Grant and a sneak preview of Midi Onodera's *Skin Deep*, which because of its Canadian distribution contract, cannot be reviewed in this article. Produced by American filmmaker Peter Reed, who died from an AIDS-related illness just months before the film's premiere, *Under Heat*, though melodramatic in parts, is an engaging and realistic portrayal of one white middle class American family's struggles with death, family secrets, abuse, cancer and AIDS. One of the finest moments is a steamy sex scene between the main character Dean (Eric Swanson) and a young local boy, in which lust, affection and emotion are present in equal parts illustrating a kind of sweet, tender homo-love not often-seen in mainstream media representation of gay men.

Realistic queer imagery was proudly visible throughout the festival. "So Are You,"



curated by Ken Anderlini, presented four visually beautiful videos that challenge concepts of desire and eroticism and the ways in which they are complicated by racism. *Heaven, Earth and Hell*, by Thomas Allen Harris, uses the Trickster of African and First Nations cultures juxtaposed with myth and poetry to tell a story of first love. Paul Wong's provocative "So Are You" breaks away from politically correct ways of discussing racism and sexism, as the video deconstructs stereotypes.



Production still from *Heaven, Earth and Hell*, Thomas Allen Harris, video, 1994, 26 min. Distributor: Third World Newsreel, New York.

Middle: still from *When Shirley Met Florence*, Ronit Bezalel, 16mm, 1994, 27 min. Distributor: National Film Board of Canada.

Bottom: still from *Skin Deep*, Midi Onodera, 35mm, 1995, 85 min.



In "Home Improvements: Renovating Family Values," curators Imtiaz Popat and Seanna McPherson served up a culturally diverse, eclectic mix of short films and videos about kids with queer parents, parents with queer kids, dyke grandchildren and queer siblings. *Daughters of Dykes* by Amilca Palmer gives voice to teenage girls with lesbian mothers, who speak candidly and with humour about the struggles they face in a homophobic world. *Mother Fuckers*, by Laurel Swenson, articulates a lesbian mother's anger at being romanticized by other dykes. A problematic film in the program was *Dinner at Bubby's*, by Ziad Touma and Kim Segal. The film is about a Jewish American family confronted with their homophobia when their son comes out at Friday night dinner at Bubby's (grandmother's). My anticipation of the inclusion of Jewish content turned to disappointment with the highly exaggerated/insulting portrayal of the Jewish family.



The festival later redeemed itself in the way of positive images of Jewish culture with the Academy Award-nominated *Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter*, by Deborah Hoffman and *When Shirley Met Florence*, by Ronit Bazalel. Quick paced, poignant and humorous, *Complaints* is a documentation of a woman coping with her mother's changing personality due to Alzheimer's. Hoffman's identity as a lesbian is tossed into the narrative naturally without any explanation or excuses, merely as a fact of her life. *When Shirley* is a fascinating, honest and sweet portrait

of a lifelong friendship between two sixty-something Jewish women, one straight and one lesbian, who share a love of Yiddish music, common history and unconditional love.

Curators Claudia Morgado and Francisco Ibanez put together a lively collection of works that present "what it is to be a loca in gringoland." *Samuel and Samantha: On the Emancipation of All* is a beautifully crafted piece about the struggles of Latino gay men as seen through the eyes of a Salvadoran living in Toronto, who speaks about his life as a Latino while another man does him up in full drag make-up, high heels, stockings and a dress. *Carmelita Tropicana*, by Ela Troyano, winner of the best lesbian/gay short film at the 1994 Berlin Film Festival, is a delightful musical comedy about Latina lesbian life in New York City. Scripted like an old Hollywood musical, the actors break into song spontaneously throughout an unbelievable yet charming plot that hums with the optimistic, simple flavour of an old Fred Astaire movie.

The not-necessarily-lesbian *Dream Girls*, produced in Japan and the United States by Kim Longinotto and Jano Williams, is a stunning documentary about Japan's Takarazuka Music School. Out of the thousands of young girls who apply to the school each year only forty are accepted. After two years of vigorous training the girls perform in musical revues to all female audiences, which are sold out months in advance. The male parts are played by girls who are chosen for their physique and ability to sing in lower registers. They are known as Top Stars and are adored by millions of young female fans whose enthusiasm exceeds Beatlemania. While the underlying lesbian/transgender subtext is never openly discussed in the film, images of butch-femme dyke culture and eroticism between women are clearly evident throughout.

"Retrossex," a video program curated by Carrie Martin and Kathleen Mullen, featured many interesting and sexy videos, including local video artist Lorna Boshman's classic *Butch/Femme in Paradise* and Shani Mootoo's *Her Sweetness Lingers*. The pacing of the program was somewhat disjointed by the inclusion midway of *Keep Your Laws Off My Body*, a piece about state censorship.

Naturally, the festival was not without controversy. *Chicken Hawks: Men who Love Boys* focused on the lives of five NAMBLA members and dealt with both sides of the debate on paedophilia. Festival organizers decided to screen the video because "we feel that it is crucial that this work be seen in a queer context, allowing our community to discuss the issue amongst ourselves, instead of the film premiering in a homophobic setting which might distort the issues...."

Also controversial is the work of San Francisco filmmaker Michael Wallin, who was in attendance to introduce his films. Most interesting is Wallin's first film, *The Place Between Our Bodies*. Made in 1975, it portrays a pre-AIDS sexual/love relationship between two men. The film, which was popular on its original release, fell into disfavour for many years because of its depiction of unprotected anal intercourse. Wallin suggested in his introduction that the film is once again gaining popularity because it is seen as a historical documentation of the time known as "The Party": 1970s San Francisco gay male culture, a nostalgic moment in queer history.

A program entitled "Slap Me Spank Me" focused on SM sexuality. My personal favourite was *Stellium in Capricorn*, a visually stunning black and white video about lesbian SM play, specifically piercing. The artist Georgia Wright succeeds in capturing sexual desire in slow motion close-up shots of the actor's faces that appear so authentic it is like being privy

to a real couple having real sex. Isaac Julien's *The Attendant* tackles the problem inherent in SM play that involves scenes with masters and slaves, examining through recognizable visual icons how in North American culture the images are never free from a history of racism. *A Lot of Fun for the Evil One* was a dreadfully produced eighteen-minute video that might have been passable had it been cut down to two or three minutes. Heavily stilted acting was the worst aspect of the piece, as a bisexual threesome, whipped, spanked and fucked each other with as much passion as one might exude while mopping the kitchen floor.

One of my favourite programs featured the work of a hot young artist to watch out for. Philadelphia/New York-based Cheryl Dunye has been producing independent queer media since 1991. In this retrospective of Dunye's work, the festival presented six of her works, all of which ring with her signature style — young, hip, funny, political, a real taste of 1990s North American urban lesbian life. Dunye's works explore issues of racism, Black pride, interracial relationships and lesbian ritual in recognizable scenarios, which breathe with the unpredictable contradictions of real life drama. I wouldn't be surprised to soon see a feature film directed by Dunye.

A commendable feature of "Out On Screen" was a greater inclusion and integration of films and videos by lesbians and gay men of colour. Although there were several programs that exclusively showcased the works of African American dykes, Latino queers and Asian gay men, for the most part works by people of colour were present in most screenings.

Karen X. Tulchinsky is a Jewish lesbian writer who lives in Vancouver. Her first collection of short stories, In Her Nature, is forthcoming from the Women's Press in the fall of 1995.

NEGOTIATING THE ZIG ZAG DIVIDE

Discerner of Hearts and Other Stories

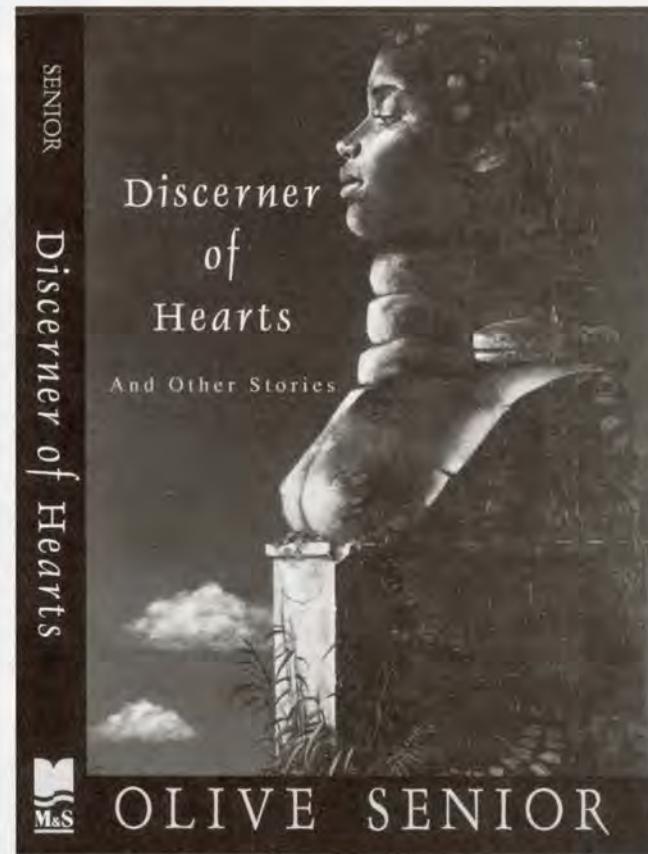
(TORONTO: McCLELLAND AND STEWART, 1995)

BY OLIVE SENIOR

REVIEW BY HONOR FORD-SMITH

Beneath the crisp economic prose of Olive Senior's magnetic collection of stories, *Discerner of Hearts*, lies layered poetic fable. Caribbean protagonists negotiate the precipitous zig zag divide between two worlds: the world of bourgeois Euro-colonial values and another world, one created in rural communities steeped in the growing of food and herbs, in spiritual revival, in African-Caribbean justice systems of obeah and myal. But negotiation is treacherous. Between the edges of the zig zag is a huge precipice — and if you are a character in one of her narratives, you must confront and overcome the many disguises of the monsters who guard this zig zag divide. Only then can you cross safely.

These monsters are the offspring of colonialism — the architects of jealousy, envy, callous cruelty and hypocrisy. If you can't rout them or turn them back and you fall off the precipice, you may go mad — like Isabella Francina Myrtella Jones. Isabella is the woman of the Lady Musgrave crossroads who seems a beggar, but is really a teller of short tales. Having succumbed to rejection, jealousy and the belief that "broughtupsy and certification" is all, Isabella tells all who pass by her sidewalk dwelling varied versions of her downfall. She flatters and blesses those who reward her with a few coins and curses those who leave her empty-handed. Uncle, in "The Case against the Queen," returns to his family in Jamaica after years in England, his voice "rich and fruity," his body "ramrod stiff." Every afternoon, attired in three piece suit, bowler hat and walking stick, Uncle goes for a stroll in the



four o'clock sun down the middle of the rocky hill-and-gully parochial road. He never takes off his suit and he never unpacks his trunk full of papers. The rural community accepts him as one more living example of the popular wisdom that all Caribbean people who stay too long in the Queen's country risk, if not outright lunacy, then at least partial insanity. Uncle believes that Her Majesty's surgeons kidnapped him, removed his heart and replaced it with a machine. His trunk full

of documents testifies to his efforts to mount a legal case against the Queen.

Not all of Senior's characters are simultaneously elegant and hilarious. Not all fall between the teeth of the zig zag. Those who overcome are those who can move beyond boundaries to discern hearts and true character and triumphantly subvert the divisions between the two worlds. They can borrow from both worlds to build bridges across the

chasm — to invent the future. In Senior's stories, these heroes and heroines are always found among the unlikely: middle class girl children, lovers, domestic workers.

In the collection's title story, Theresa (a young middle class "turn-skin" girl) rejects taboos against traditional creolized African healing systems. She enlists the support of a powerful myal man to "pull" the powers which have ensnared her family's domestic helper, Cissy, in guilt and fear. In supporting Cissy's struggle to overcome the fear which binds her, both grow into mature womanhood, having crossed the boundaries of class, colour and shade. Cissy's ability to resolve her problem within her community and its traditions is the mirror image of Isabella Francina Myrtella Jones' maddening isolation. In "Window," Dev, the young black grandson of Ma Lou, the aging maid-manager of an impoverished white landowning family, returns home and determines to marry Bridget, the young lady of the house. Having survived the nightmare of hard labour building the Panama Canal and successfully crossed national and economic boundaries, he dares to try crossing the rigid social borders of early twentieth century Jamaica. The mere idea of this intermixing of classes, races and castes creates shock waves that immobilize the young man. In the final moments of the story it is Bridget, the shy mountain girl, who acting on her own desire opens her jalousied bedroom window to move beyond the decrepit house toward Dev's body, and the night sounds of the yard.

Senior is at her best in representing these small acts of everyday transgression. For while she exposes the rigidity of the enduring colonial social order (a tightly layered race-coded structure which overdetermines possibility) she continually points to its irony — that precisely in the heart of such clumsy social determinism lie the seeds of imaginative remaking. Her writing illuminates the ways in which oppositional relationships and random acts of rebellion overturn — no — overturn

the boundaries of structure. In making this point, she draws on many familiar strategies of Caribbean fiction. She expands the representation of the wise child (most familiar to us as the working class child in the work of Naipaul, Lamming and Kincaid) concentrating most skillfully on rural, middle class, mixed-race girl children. She reworks the stereotype of the faithful black Mammy by presenting complicated forthright women, who are anything but subservient and who are always fully concentrated on their lives beyond the workplace. As her stories weave together these themes, so her graceful prose leaps back and forth along the continuum between the Jamaican language and English — altering the limits of "good" English while simultaneously inscribing the tongue of the nation.

Senior herself knows whereof she speaks. While she was raised and educated in Montego Bay, Jamaica's second city, she comes from a district in rural Jamaica that perches near the sparsely mapped Cockpit Country terrain. Edging the limits of cartography, the stories she spins are most often set right there in the geography of the unwritten, in the tough limestone geology where scrubby egg-like mountains hide deep underground caves of mighty stalactites and stalagmites. Like Desrine's village hidden high up the mountain path in "Zig Zag," these hidden worlds are the reservoirs for the narratives she draws out.

But if *Discerner of Hearts* points to the possibilities of resolving colonial dichotomies, it also sounds a grim warning. The possibility of bridging and transcending oppositions is for Senior inevitably embedded in a world of rural community — where survival needs have wrought a kind of kindred and where the creolized African experience has healed the indignities of slave exploitation. Several of the stories point to the death of this tradition — its integrity undermined by unmitigated forces of greed and envy, the wisdom of its matriarchs overturned. This undoing is linked to migration, urbanization, industrialization, Big-man

politicians and finally to the drug trade in crack/cocaine.

In laying down the causes of postcolonial crisis as she does, Senior creates stories which re-inscribe the dichotomy between rural/urban, bad/good in such a way as to border on an idealization of rural peasant values. These values are presented as fixed and held in consensus. Paradoxically, the details of the stories themselves undermine this idealization by showing the limitations of tough, isolated rural life. But where violence occurs in the narrative, it is always an alien other that brings destruction. The cruelty inherent in aspects of rural life is never linked to the violence that seems to threaten the entire postcolonial nation. The evil doers are like shadowy beings, coming from afar and seen at a distance. They loom slowly and strike suddenly.

Senior's picture of rural Jamaica excludes the violent relations of power on rural estates, the arrogance, the slash and burn exploitativeness of many of the upper middle class and the limitations of peoples who often had to work too hard too long, live in unhealthy conditions and be undernourished in dependent societies. These factors, even while they were resisted and sometimes transcended, always confused, complicated and threatened the integrity of communities. They placed the meaning of values constantly under pressure and forced flexibility upon them. These forces taught lessons and did damage. Most importantly, we internalized them, often in highly complicated ways. These exclusions tax my ability to believe wholeheartedly in the picture that Senior paints.

Discerner of Hearts is accessible, engrossing and amusing. It is thoughtfully wrought — each story carefully textured, balanced, resolved with not a single excess word. The collection should appeal to readers of diverse ages and backgrounds. Hopefully, it will contribute to a less parochial notion of what "Canadian" short stories might look like.

Honor Ford-Smith is a writer and educator who lives and studies in Toronto.

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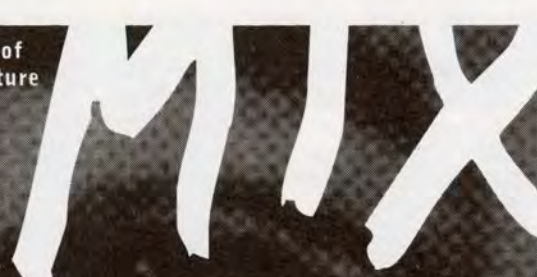
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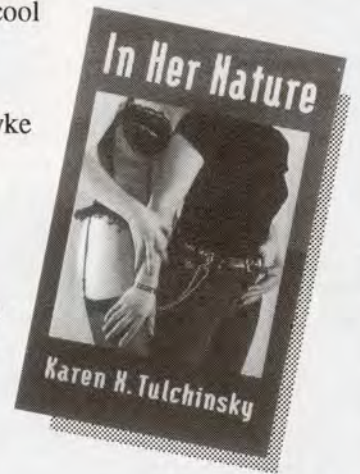
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