

Volume 20 Number 4 \$5.50

A magazine about issues of art and culture

# FUSE

MAGAZINE

The Art of Willie Doherty  
by Aoife Mac Namara

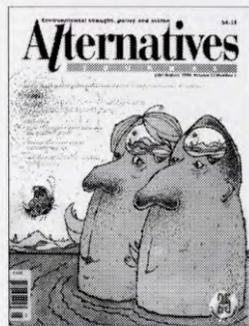
Interview with Kobena Mercer

The Commodification of Canadian Culture

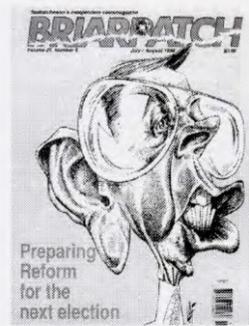
Reviews of *Coco Fusco*, *Studiolo*, *Sunnybrook*,  
*Scoping Boys & Scoping Girls*,  
*City at the End of Time*,  
*My Mother's Last Dance*

The Only Good One Is a Dead One





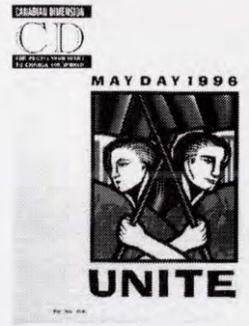
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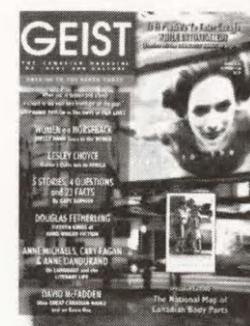
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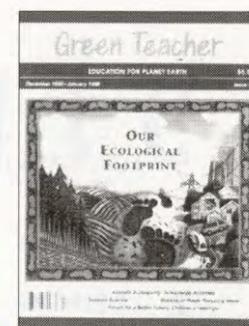
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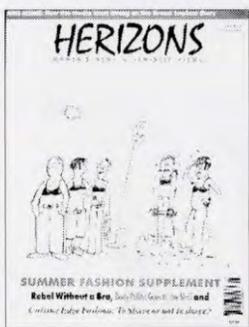
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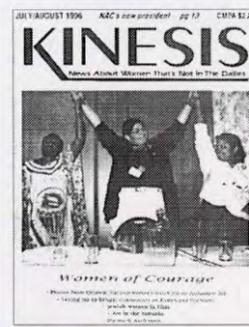
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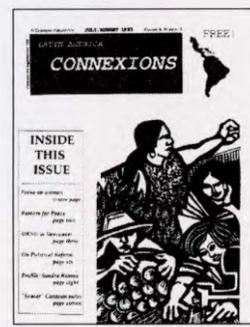
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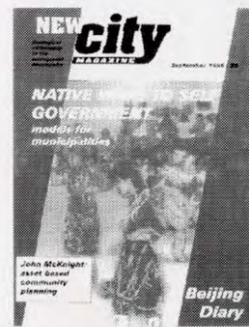
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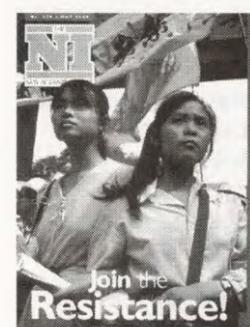
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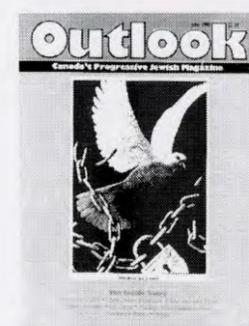
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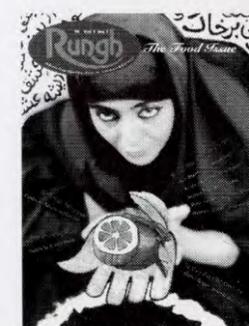
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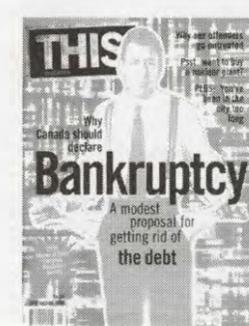
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# FUSE

MAGAZINE

VOLUME 20 NUMBER 4 AUGUST 1997

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R. William Hill, Marilyn Jung, David McIntosh, Renuka Sooknanan  
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and Shawn Syms for proofreading.

FUSE is published five times a year (includes one special issue) by Artons Cultural  
Affairs Society and Publishing Inc., a non-profit artist's organization.  
Our offices are located at 401 Richmond Street West, Suite 454, Toronto, Ontario,  
Canada M5V 3A8, E-mail: fuse@interlog.com, tel: (416) 340-8026, fax: (416) 340-  
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FUSE acknowledges financial assistance from the Canada Council and the Ontario  
Arts Council and the many hours of volunteer and partially paid labour that are  
provided by everyone listed on our masthead.

Subscription rates: \$20 per year; Institutions \$32 per year  
(in Canada only). Outside Canada \$24 U.S. per year; Institutions \$38 U.S.  
Decisions regarding who qualifies as an individual subscriber remain the right of  
the publisher.

Printed in Canada on recycled, acid-free paper by C.J. Graphics Inc.

ISSN 0838-603X

FUSE is indexed in the Alternative Press Index and is a member of the Canadian  
Magazine Publisher's Association.



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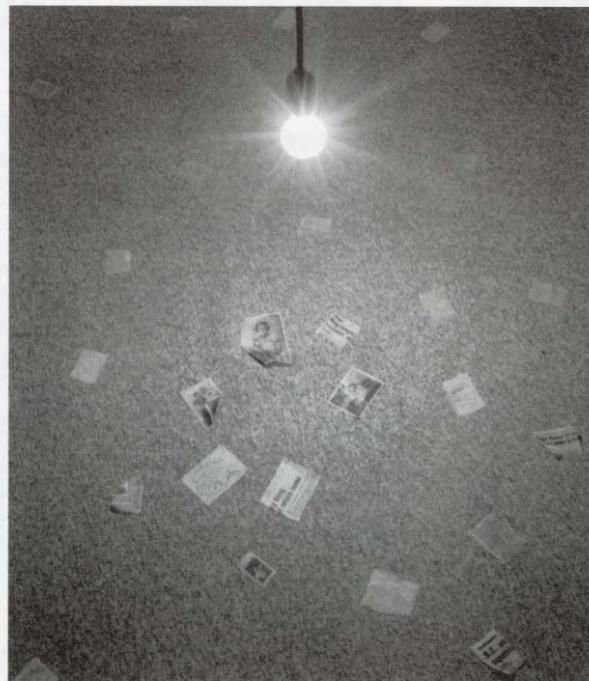
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**Above:** Detail from *The Cage Maker*, Mary Sui-Yee  
Wong, 1997. See review of "City at the End of Time,"  
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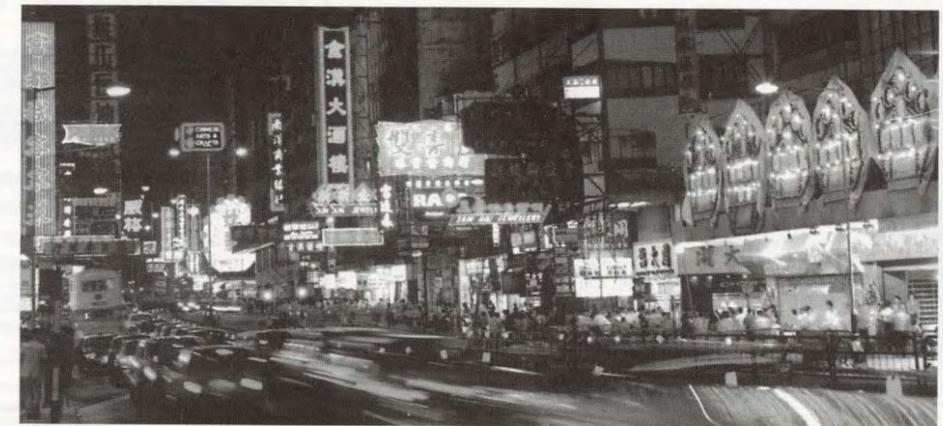
**Cover image:** Stills from *The Only Good One is a  
Dead One*, Willie Doherty, 1993, double screen video  
installation with sound. Courtesy of the Art Gallery  
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**editorial**

After twenty years, FUSE continues to address the politics of cultural representation both at home and abroad: representations still matter. In this issue Aoife Mac Namara's feature article on Willie Doherty, Daniel Yon's interview with British cultural theorist Kobena Mercer and Katarzyna Rukszto's column on the selling of Canadian culture, the pertinent issues of representation, race, nation, colonial histories and community are problematized and critically reflected on. As always, a substantial review section continues the engagement with the issues of cultural representation. FUSE also features an artist project by Martha Fleming and Lyne Lapointe, in tandem with a review of *Studiolo*, by Camilla Griggers and Nell Tenhaaf.

Mac Namara's "The Only Good One is a Dead One: The Art of Willie Doherty," investigates the political process involved in self-determination and identity formation in Ireland. As Mac Namara reports, Doherty's installation is a complex representation that questions the colonial Gaze, as well as the gaze of the colonized while providing a narrative that seeks to break the controlling power of the gaze. Mac Namara's report on the installation moves through the elaborately worked-up description of Doherty's art to raise questions of language and Irish cultural resistance to continued English colonial practices. Questions of culture, nation and colonial history are explored.

Similarly, Daniel Yon's conversation with Kobena Mercer is an exciting and engaging dialogue on the politics of representation, culture, community, diaspora and anti-racism. Both Yon and Mercer refuse a simplistic analysis in their discussion. Opting instead for the complexities involved in the politics of identity and its jagged edges the discussion moves fluidly from issues of hybridity to sexual difference, to the spectacle of the Million Man March. The conversation pays attention to the interconnections and contradictions of race, sexuality and gender. Their refusal of binaries is deeply rooted in unapologetic post-colonial theoretical positions.

When does Canada become post-colonial? This question could well have framed Katarzyna Rukszto's "Up for Sale: The Commodification of Canadian Culture." "Up for Sale" is a critical reflection on the selling of Canadian "culture" abroad. Using the television Heritage Minutes as a trope for what might sell as Canadian "culture" the piece takes up the questions of heritage, multicultural discourse and the lack of real funding for Canadian artists. The piece suggests that in the era of reduced arts funding, selling Canada might reduce artistic expression to those works that reproduce unproblematic invocations of nation building with patriotic fervour.

Finally, this issue of FUSE is the culmination of the efforts of our many Contributing Editors. A group of editors whose local, national and international reach gives FUSE a critical perspective on issues related to the arts and cultural events from different places. We would like to express our thanks to them for gathering many of the articles.

**letters to the editors**

Dear FUSE:

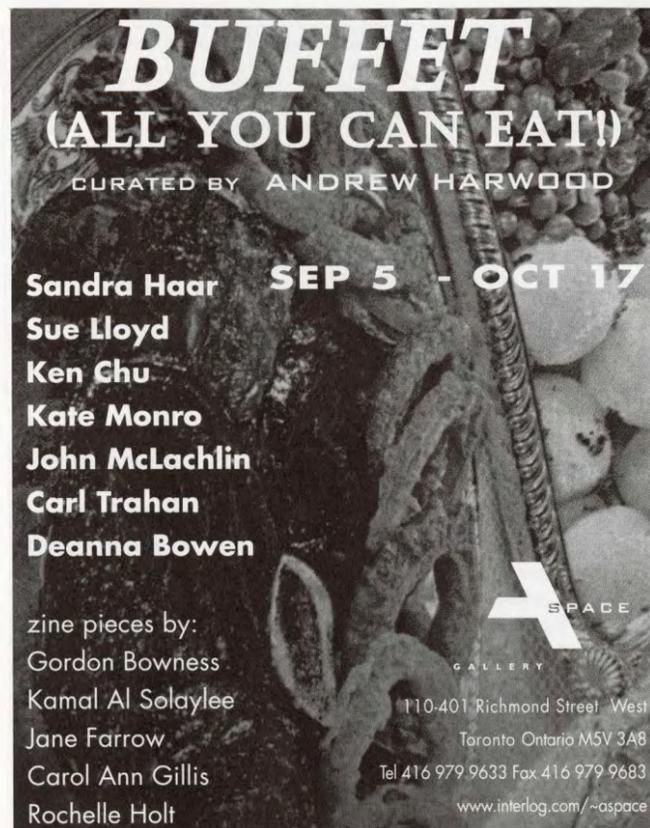
A shout out to Julian Samuel for his review of Alan Read's Review of the Fact of Blackness: Frantz Fanon and Visual Representation. One unfortunate fallout of postmodernism has been the evacuation of any lived experience or struggle from discussions of race or ethnicity. Black, for instance, becomes merely an aesthetic, and the back-breaking and often soul-destroying work of trying to stem the scourge of white supremacy and to create a space from which to live and/or write merely a moment of history. Which of course is dead! While I don't agree entirely with all that Samuel says, his trenchant revelation of the postmodernist project for what it is, is spot on. The emperor indeed has no clothes!

M. Nourbese Philip  
 Toronto

FUSE:

Julian Samuel's review of *The Fact of Blackness* in the last issue of FUSE is a rather banal and lame rendition of an attempt to be interventionist. His attacks of personalities, reducing them to "kings of cultural studies" is not only unfair but refuses to engage with the issues the authors set out to deal with. Had Samuel's engaged with the idea the various essays in *The Fact of Blackness* represent he might have been able to stay away from attacking a number of the academics who he believes to be "stars" and probably would have found himself engaging with the work of some of the lesser-know contributors. Samuel's "review" lacks credibility when he asserts that the contributors in *The Fact of Blackness* do not live up to Fanon's ideal. Like all old-time so-called radicals he reduces Fanon to violence. Samuel's has clearly decided to both ignore the complexities of Fanon that the contributors to *The Fact of Blackness* are attempting to get readers to engage with. The world we live in is far too complex to lend itself to too-easy articulations of violence—unless, that is, you engage in the binaries of which Samuel's violent review is an example.

Len Shorter  
 Toronto



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Judy Radul

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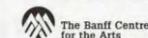
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# Up for Sale

THE COMMODIFICATION OF CANADIAN CULTURE

by Katarzyna Rukszto

McDonald's, the fast food chain, is the new player on Canada's arts and culture scene. The company has agreed to distribute and subsidize True North comics, a series of historical comics produced by McClelland and Stewart and the CRB Foundation. The first comic in the series, with a new comic due to be distributed every three months, is *The Halifax Explosion*, which depicts the 1917 collision of two ships in the Halifax Harbour. The disaster resulted in over 2000 deaths. Upcoming comics will depict the discovery of dinosaur remains in Canada, the building of the Canadian rail-ways and the story of the hockey mask.

The comics are based on the *Heritage Minutes*, also produced by the CRB Foundation and shown on television and in movie theatres. Largely hailed as an innovative way to attract kids and teenagers to Canadian history, this collaboration raises questions about the impact of market prerogatives on Canadian art and culture. One of these questions is, what sells?

## SELLING AT HOME

Barbara Godard argues that the establishment of the Canada Council has produced a home-grown cultural community, where "no longer dependent on the market place of the metropole, artists could create more freely for the Canadian public."<sup>1</sup> But forsaking international fame in the name of artistic integrity may soon be left without much reward. As more and more artists turn to fundraising to weather the storm of cuts to Canadian arts organizations, different strings get attached to their work on the domestic front. Unlike Canada Council, with its arms-length policy, funding from private foundations and financiers often comes with specific criteria for the artists' work based on the mandate of the organization. The artists, still producing for the Canadian public, are bound by the representational limits that such mandates impose. While the objective of selling Canada abroad is not omnipresent, in the case of organizations or agencies mandated to promote national unity the objective of

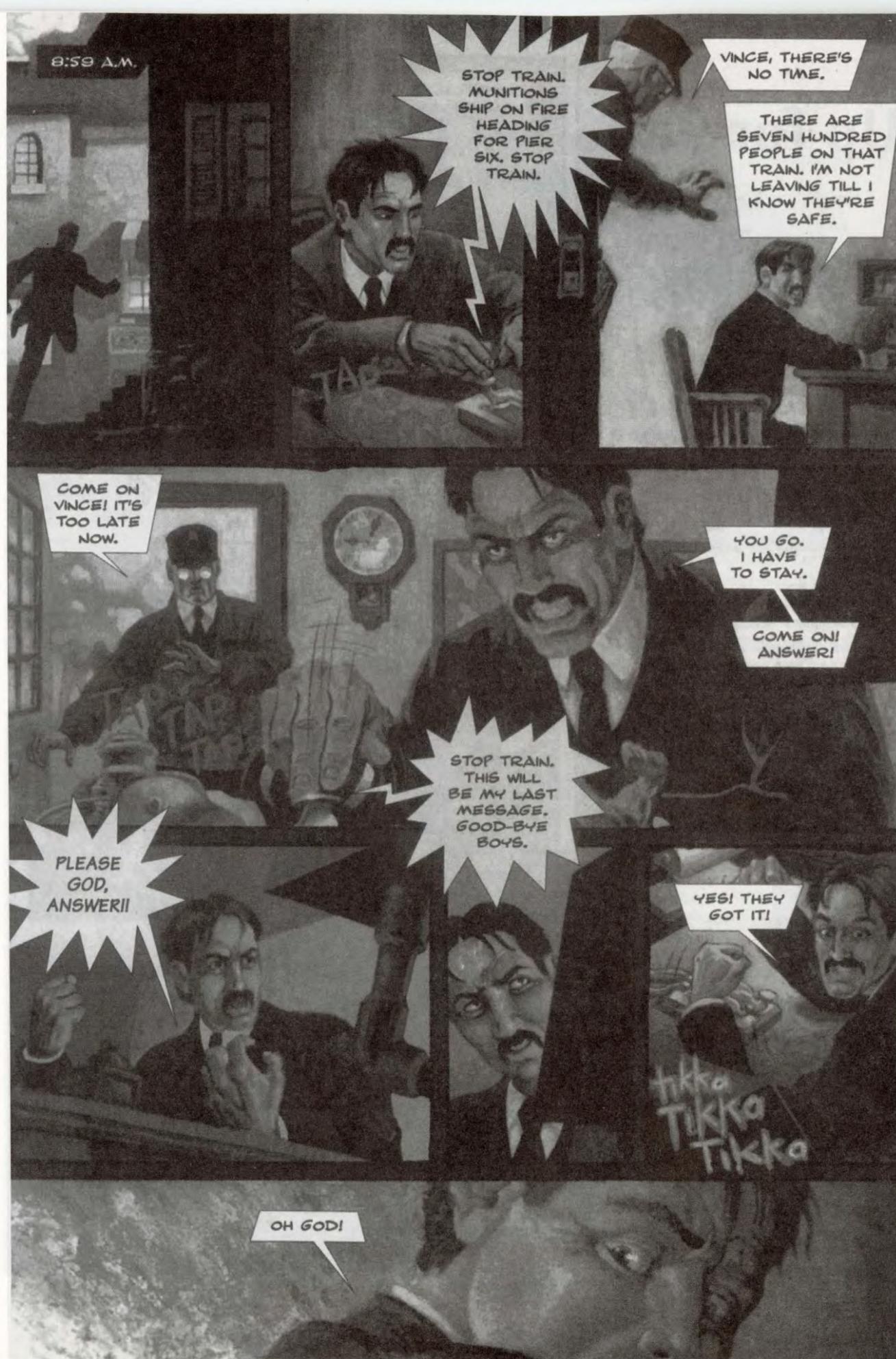
selling Canada to Canadians can be as limiting. The question becomes, which stories will be told, which aspects of Canadian collective memory get financed?

The *Heritage Minutes* that gave rise to the True North comics distributed at McDonald's are one example of work produced by artists guided by the objectives of private financiers of "Canadian culture." The CRB Foundation developed its *Heritage Project* in order "to increase young people's sense of Canadian pride and identity by stimulating greater interest in Canada's past." The *Minutes*, high quality "mini-movies" about notable Canadian events and persons, form the centre-piece of this project. Clearly then, while the *Minutes* were not designed as export material, they are in the business of selling Canada to Canadians. The writers, directors and actors involved in the creation of the minutes were guided by the objectives of the CRB Foundation Heritage Project, dedicated as it is to promoting Canadian heritage.

On the surface, the *Heritage Minutes* offer an assortment of diverse moments in Canadian history, from Ukrainian migration to the Prairies to Canadian inventions of such highly Americanized symbols as the basketball hoop and Superman. They certainly do feature, as the Project's promotional literature boasts, "such diverse subjects as political rights, heroism, achievements in sports and entertainment, women's issues, and medical breakthroughs." But what I would like to know is, would Andrew Moodie's potential film based on *Riot* have better luck getting funded by the Foundation?

## SELLING ABROAD

The debate about the marketability of Canadian culture (and, conversely, whether such a thing is desirable) has been raised to a new pitch on the heels of comments by Trade Minister Art Eggleton about the viability of protectionist cultural policies. Eggleton suggested that the policies that protect Canadian cultural ownership and control may in fact hinder the



8:59 A.M.

STOP TRAIN. MUNITIONS SHIP ON FIRE HEADING FOR PIER SIX. STOP TRAIN.

VINCE, THERE'S NO TIME.

THERE ARE SEVEN HUNDRED PEOPLE ON THAT TRAIN. I'M NOT LEAVING TILL I KNOW THEY'RE SAFE.

COME ON VINCE! IT'S TOO LATE NOW.

YOU GO. I HAVE TO STAY.

COME ON! ANSWER!

STOP TRAIN. THIS WILL BE MY LAST MESSAGE. GOOD-BYE BOYS.

PLEASE GOD, ANSWER!!

YES! THEY GOT IT!

OH GOD!

tikka  
tikka  
tikka

export of Canadian cultural products. These latest comments provided more ammunition to publishers, arts groups, TV producers and writers who have consistently criticized the federal and provincial governments' lack or withdrawal of commitment to the arts. But the fury was also directed (at least by some) at the prejudicial interest of Eggleton in commercial artistic ventures, in fostering the link between artists and private enterprise. Again, if selling Canada is the objective of institutions providing financial support to artists, what will be on the market? Remember the criticism of the CRTC for rendering its decision that Bryan Adams' record did not have enough Canadian content? How do commercially successful Canadian superstars—Celine Dion, Shania Twain, Bryan Adams—differ from their American counterparts?

The debate clearly recognizes two markets, the domestic and the export. The problems with exporting cultural products anchored in Canadian politics and cultures has been well documented. Andrew Moodie, the author of the award-winning *Riot*, has recently reported on the seemingly insurmountable difficulties of turning his play into a movie without sacrificing recognizable Canadian content.<sup>2</sup> American cultural invasion notwithstanding, *Riot* is about a group of young Black Canadians living in Toronto during the riot sparked by the Rodney King verdict. Moodie writes of the seeming incongruity in the movie industry between, in the words of a Canadian producer he quotes, "producing for Canada and producing for the world." Moodie's lament against the metamorphosis of the Kensington Market stuffed pepper into a Big Mac is shared by many others (witness such domestically successful, but internationally unknown artists as Luba, The Parachute Club, Jane Siberry and The Tragically Hip).

#### ADVERTISING HERITAGE

The CRB Foundation Heritage Project is explicitly devoted to promoting Canadian heritage. This it does by sponsoring educational forums and fairs about Canadian heritage, by funding the creation of learning resources about Canadian heritage, and by producing the *Heritage Minutes*. Since their first arrival on our television screens, the *Minutes* have become a recognizable reference in Canadian pop culture. One would be hard pressed to find anyone with a TV set who has not seen some of the *Minutes*, and a spoof of the *Minutes* has even made it into the repertoire of *This Hour Has 22 Minutes*.

The *Heritage Minutes* are a rather curious product(ion). They are promoted as mini-movies, but are shown in the advertising space of television and cinema. The series' mandate (and it does have one) is, at times, excruciatingly obvious: its objective is to foster

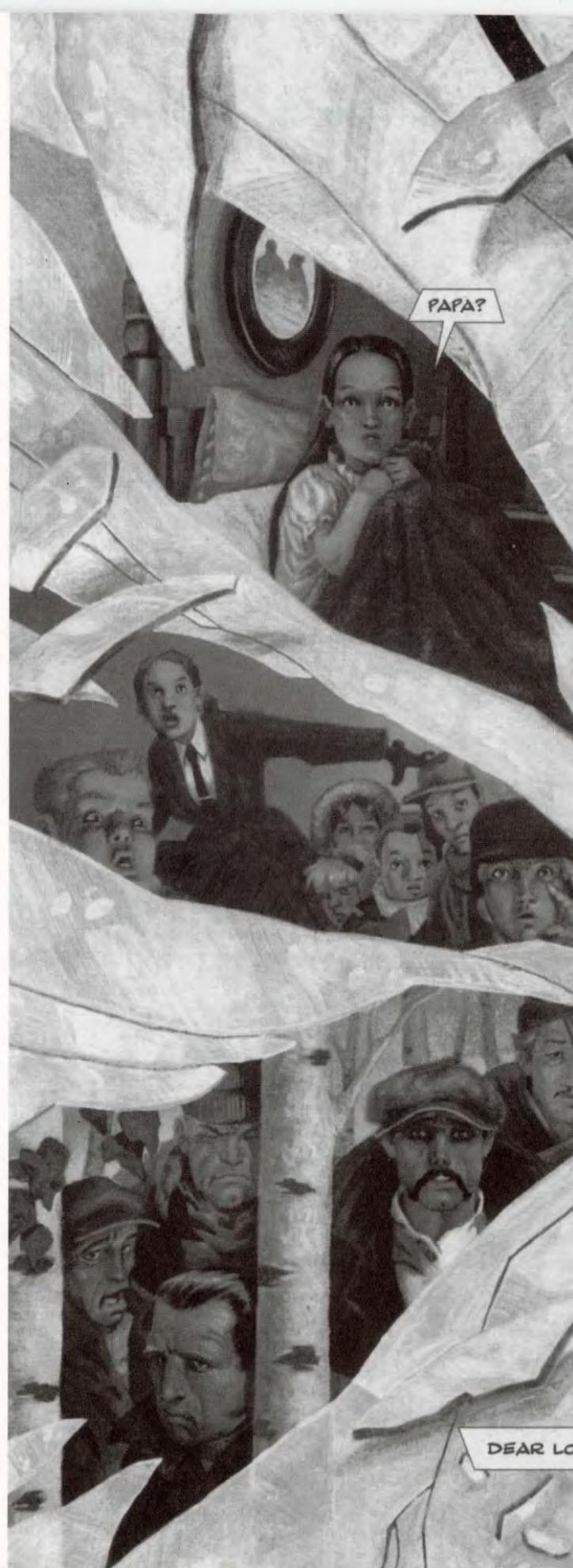
Opposite and following page: from *The Halifax Explosion*, a comic book published by True North Comics, McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1997. Distributed by McDonald's.

national identification among Canadian citizens by raising awareness of and interest in Canadian heritage and history. The pathos and solemnity of the *Minutes* emphasize the sacredness of their subject, and the seriousness of their address. Whether the focus is on the famous Saguenay Fire or Nellie McClung's activism, the *Minutes* tell us, one after another, that we have much to be proud of. Our heritage is rich and adventurous, full of heroes and inventors; in the words of Michael Valpy, it is "our cultural DNA." If they were exportable, the *Minutes* would fit the criteria for funding from External Affairs. The recently published set of guidelines by that department for artists applying for travel grants specified that artists who promote "respect for Canadian unity and Canadian sovereignty" will be eligible.<sup>3</sup> A number of *Heritage Minutes* focus explicitly on the relations between the English and the French in Canada. The *Heritage Minute* titled "Baldwin and Lafontaine" is exemplary in its depiction of the "two politicians from Upper and Lower Canada [who] demonstrate an early example of French/English cooperation when Lafontaine seeks election in Toronto and goes on to help shape democratic reforms of all Canada."<sup>4</sup> The hopeful possibility of brotherly love is carried through all of the minutes depicting French-English relations. National unity is the emblem of the series.

The nationalist address of the *Minutes* promotes "the role of art in nation-building as civilizing to unify."<sup>5</sup> The narrative of heritable belonging is silently couched against the forces of plural narratives and critiques of the nation. The discourse of these representations is one that is shared by many believers in the panacea of "cross-communication": we don't see ourselves/each other as Canadians because we are ignorant of our history/heritage. The role of the minutes, as one vehicle of communication, is to infuse patriotism into the everyday of Canadians. That great Canadian pastime, the game of "what is a Canadian," will be more entertaining with answers in the positive.

#### TRUTH IN ADVERTISING

What are the representational limits that organize the work of artists in such an enterprise? What aspects of the Canadian imaginary sell, and which cannot be "consumed" as heritage? It is quite clear that national unity is the over-riding theme of the CRB Foundation series. But the *Minutes* do represent moments of crisis, diverse populations and political conflicts. When read



casually (like an ad) the *Minutes* can be seen as participants in a larger pedagogical discourse of multiculturalism as a sort of history lesson from a liberal educational perspective. But the impetus behind this lesson in cross-cultural understanding of Canadians' different experiences is to homogenize them as "heritage." Although diverse, the heritage traits that Canadians are deemed to share are those of adventure, survival and cooperation in the joint project of nation-building. That's our cultural DNA.

The theme of national unity creates enormous strains on artists interested in those histories best known for their challenges to and survival against the Canadian nation-state. The minute "Underground Railroad" fully embodies the contradictions of telling a story of struggle against racist oppression within the framework of homogenizing nationalism. In this minute, a distraught Black woman is awaiting her loved one who is journeying to freedom in Canada. A white woman saves the day by restraining the hysterical Black woman. Black people are the grateful recipients of the organization of good white folks on their behalf, shouting praises for Canada as the land of freedom. While it is commendable that the story of Black presence in Canada is included in this popular rendition of Canadian heritage, it is done so only by removing all hints of the mistreatment that awaited Black people here. It is just a hunch, but I doubt that a minute about the return to the United States during and after the American Civil War of the majority of African Americans who fled to Canada is in the making.<sup>6</sup> Could a minute be made about the infamous razing of Africville, or about the police shootings of young Black men?

The framework of national unity necessarily homogenizes the subject of its address. Heritage, nation and culture are collapsed into one, presupposing the homogeneous "Canadian." At the same time, there is a tension between this generic Canadian and the actual histories and presence of voices intent on making their particularity within the Canadian nation-state known. This brings us back to the questions of "our" culture's genes.

#### THE DNA OF NATIONALIST DISCOURSE

For an artist who is commissioned/hired to participate in such a venture as the *Heritage Minutes*, the question of what will sell as Canadian heritage can be a troublesome one. Often it seems to have been answered in the traditional mode of heritage discourse, that is by showcasing great men and women and their contributions to the project of nation-building. Not surprisingly, this approach resulted in the overwhelming whitening of the Canadian "mosaic." While diversity—of gender, ethnic origins, political persuasion, religious belonging,

hobbies—organizes the series, it is contained within a mostly white populace. It is this racial grammar that literally enhances the metaphor of genes to describe the representations of Canadian identity. Out of fifty-two minutes, forty-two are stories of white heroism, adventure and contributions to the nation.

The homogenizing effect of the *Heritage Minutes* reminds me of another display of the Canadian imaginary, the "Oh! Canada Project" presentation at the AGO, "starring" the Group of Seven. That exhibit also struggled with the contradictions between the myth of national identity (represented by the Group of Seven) and the actuality of multiple differences (represented by the "community-based arts groups" included in the exhibit). The spatial arrangement of the various segments of the show naturalized the dominant/subordinate relations in the larger society. The result, as argued by Rinaldo Walcott, was that "the very people who a colonizing discourse of nation must relegate to the margins of national space (both real and imagined) are housed on the margins of 'The Group of Seven: Art for a Nation' exhibit."<sup>7</sup>

The DNA of Canadian culture and heritage presented in the *Minutes* is a highly racialized one. As the most dominant presence in the *Minutes*, whiteness is produced as a heritable trait of the nation. Visually, the *Minutes* establish European presence and culture as the founding principle of Canada. Now this should not be read as some kind of conspiracy on the part of the producers of the series to purposely render Canada white. For all we know, each minute may have been conceptualized and produced quite independently of the others, and the selection of concepts for the minutes may have to do with such things as regional representation, ratio of historical figures to events and so on. Regardless of the process, the result is quite extraordinary. Whiteness is the dominant gene in the Canadian body politic.

However, the *Minutes*, like the *Oh! Canada Project*, consciously display its awareness of the existence of multiple ways of belonging. It can be said that the series is responsive to the crisis in representation that is being felt in all areas of cultural and political life in Canada. Dionne Brand has called it a certain panic:

...the panic of the "white" intellectual elite. It now hears other opinions and experiences of the people of colour in the country who challenge its definitions of what the country is and what it looks like.<sup>8</sup>

This means that some gestures that reference the unequal ways of belonging to the nation must now be made. The specific processes of Canadian nation-building have been made known through marginalized artists' art and literature. The *Heritage Minutes*, unable to

deny difference within the body politic, attempt to neutralize them through the narrative of common heritage. Because difference can interrupt the seamlessness of a nationalist address, it is stripped of all oppositional traits. The minute "Nitro" admits that Chinese railway workers were oppressed, but that's ancient history now (embodied through the figure of a Chinese elder telling the story to his grandchildren); similarly, aboriginal communities are imagined in the *Minutes* as relics of the past, Canadian heritage itself.

Selling Canada, both abroad and at home, is a difficult task. The troublesome events that continue to occur simply don't construct a glossy story of Canada "the good." Would Eli Langer's interrogation of child sexuality ever become a part of a Canadian conversation about ourselves in popular media, rather than an excuse for tabloid scandal-mongering? Can troublesome people, particular acts and art be sellable as Canadian heritage? As we enter an era when government officials argue for a "national" culture that sells, will cultural producers be forced deeper into poverty, or will they have to capitulate to private financiers' dictates on representational strategies?

Katarzyna Rukszto is a doctoral student in sociology at York University. The research and writing of this article was generously assisted by a grant from Toronto Arts Council.

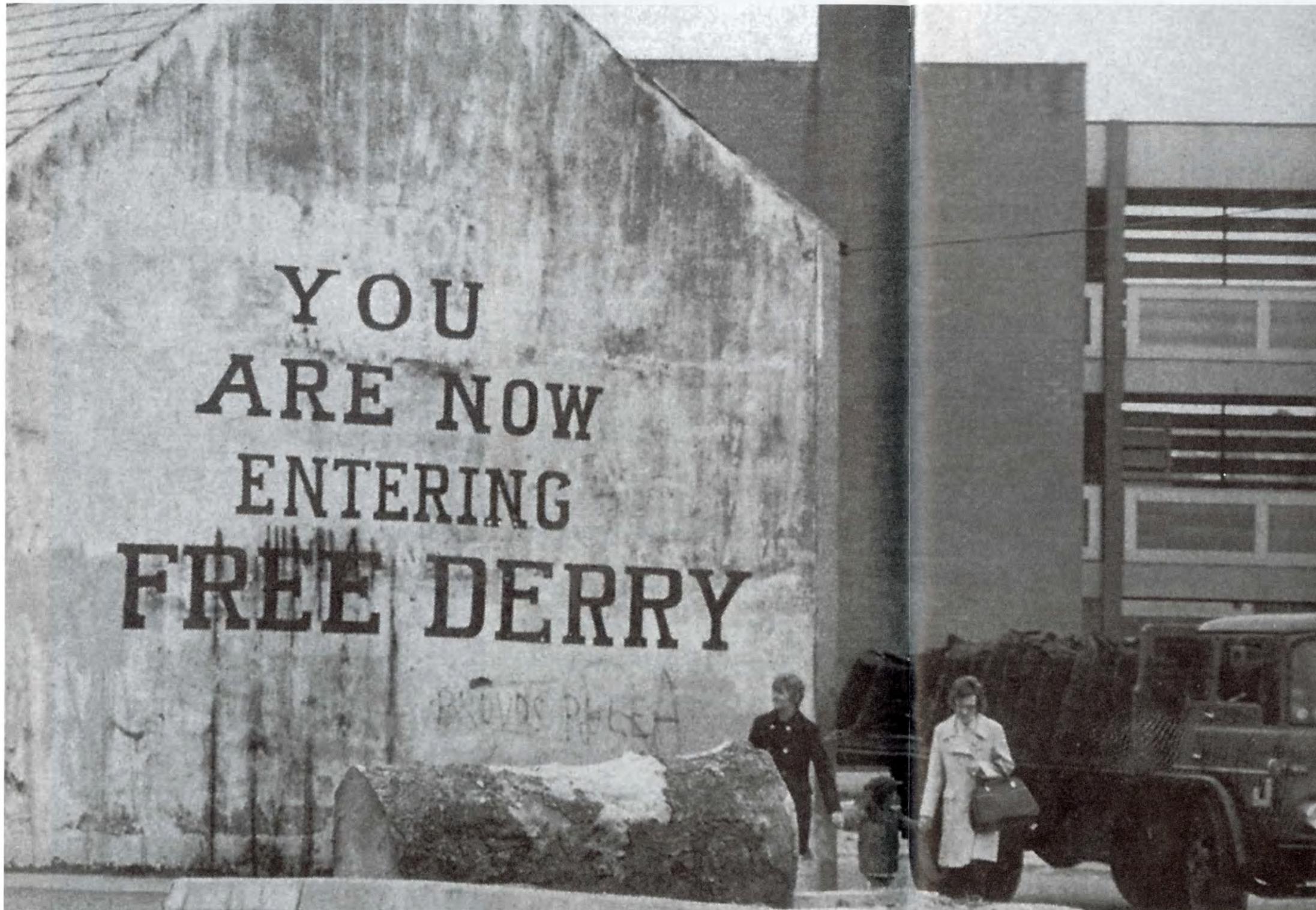
#### Notes

1. Barbara Godard "Writing on the Wall," *Border/Lines* 38-39, 1995, p. 101.
2. Andrew Moodie, "The King and I: Al Waxman (almost) makes a movie about young black Canadians," *This Magazine* 30, no. 5, 1997.
3. Lysiane Gagnon, "Effort to Boost Unity Through Artists is Wrong-Headed," *The Globe and Mail*, 22 February 1997, p. D3.
4. CRB Foundation Heritage Project, promotional materials.
5. Godard, *op. cit.*, p. 102.
6. Bruce R. Shepard, *Deemed Unsuitable* (Toronto: Umbrella Press, 1997), p. 10.
7. Rinaldo Walcott, "Lament for a Nation: The Racial Geography of 'The Oh! Canada Project,'" *FUSE Magazine* 19, no. 4, 1996, p. 16.
8. Quoted in Scott McFarlane, "The Haunt of Race: Canada's Multiculturalism Act, the Politics of Incorporation and Writing Thru Race," *FUSE Magazine* 18, no. 3, 1995, p. 20.

# The Only Good One Is a Dead One

The Art of Willie Doherty

by Aoife Mac Namara



From the later sixteenth century ... the English have presented themselves to the world as controlled, refined and rooted; and so it suited them to find the Irish hot-headed, rude and romantic, the perfect foil to set off their own virtues.

Declan Kiberd,  
*Inventing Ireland*, 1996

Writing about the relationship between art and popular expression at the beginning of Irish independence, Declan Kiberd suggests that if colonialism is a system, so also is resistance.<sup>1</sup> Historically, resistance to colonialism in Ireland has taken cultural as well as political forms. However, in spite of being England's first and most enduring colony and a place to which anti-colonial activists from North American First Nations, India, Africa and Latin America have looked for support of their own struggles for self-determination, the case of Ireland continues to be swept under the expanding carpet of post-colonial theory.<sup>2</sup>

The lack of interest in the relevance of post-colonial discourse to Irish culture has important implications for artists and audiences in contemporary Ireland, where cultural analysis has tended to fall prey to two equally unappealing orthodoxies: first, the xenophobic and nationalist (if rather flattering) readings that suggest that Ireland is a unique and extraordinary island populated by a talented and exceptional people; and second, the essentially racist and colonialist accounts that suggest that we are a violent, foolish, dishonest and child-like people without self-discipline, intellectual rigour or authority.

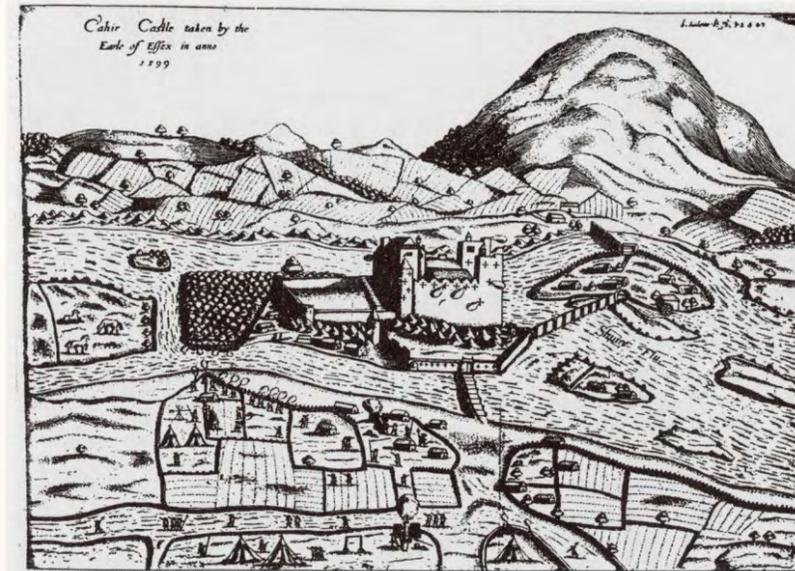
Finding in neither of these positions an adequate representation of life in Ireland, many of us have looked abroad for new ways of looking at, and reflecting upon, what it means to be an Irish person at a time renewed interest is being expressed in nationalism throughout Europe. Edward Said's influential work on orientalism has offered an interesting way of re-imagining the challenges facing artists interested in the representation of lives lived in Ireland. In considering the case of the (stateless) nation of Palestine in the context of post-colonial criticism, Said contributes to the argument that all work formulated in resistance to colonialism can be understood as post-colonial, regardless of whether it is



Orangemen's parade, July 12, 1997, Toronto. Photo by Pete Dako.

produced in territories that remain under the political and economic control of the colonial power. This argument is particularly relevant to the case of Ireland, considering that the 1921 treaty between Britain and the Provisional Government of Ireland (an accord made famous in Neil Jordan's recent film *Michael Collins*) granted independence to only twenty-six of the thirty-two counties that had together formed the four provinces of Gaelic Ireland. Said's text prompted renewed interest in the study of Ireland as part of a wider, more international discourse. This constituted an important development in a country where much nationalist and anti-imperialist scholarship had been built, not on a critique of imperialism per se, but on the rather narcissistic idea that Ireland is an exceptional place, living through unique historical, cultural and political circumstances; a place set apart from, rather than associated with, other occupied cultures.

Willie Doherty is an Irish installation artist who works in that part of Ireland that remains under British jurisdiction. Doherty produces images that challenge not only those representations of Irishness constructed in and around the intersection of British colonialism with Irish nationalism, but challenge ideas about the social construction of individual identity. Doherty's work is best considered in a framework that examines both the simplistic stereotypes that circulate in imperialist canons and the xenophobic reflections of our nationalist elite. An understanding of Ireland's historical relationship to England—that of colonized to colonizer—is crucial to developing this framework. As far back as the early seventeenth century, this relationship has organized the texts and counter-texts through which representation of Ireland has been ordered. Irish history has long been subject to representational conventions developed to serve British colonialist



Elizabethan fighting in Ireland: the capture of Cahir Castle in 1599 by the Earl of Essex.



Execution of IRA rebel Thomas McDonagh in Dublin, following the Easter week insurrection, 1916.

authority and later adopted to support nationalist struggles against it. In his video and sound installation *The Only Good One is A Dead One*, mounted recently at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Doherty produces representations of Ireland and Irishness that refuse to collude with these discursive practices.

From opposite walls of a darkened room, speakers amplify the voice of a soft-spoken young Irishman:

I worry about driving the same route everyday... I don't remember now when I started feeling conspicuous... A legitimate target. I've been watching him for weeks now. He does the same things everyday... Sadly predictable, I suppose. The fucker deserves it.

Both victim and assassin, self and other, as much stalker as stalked, the subject of this work is elusive. Is he a Unionist or Republican? Colonized or colonizer? It is impossible to tell. Doherty's protagonist is a complicated one and, although captured by the same video and sound technologies used in the surveillance of daily life in Ireland, he refuses to perform to either the colonial or nationalist gaze. He is a character around whom Doherty reinstates difference as real, rather than as a fashionable trope of contemporary practice in visual culture. Writing about Doherty's use of the city of Derry as the immediate context for this man's monologue, Dan Cameron suggests that a strength of the work is its insistence on representing its lived realities, realities which he describes as a great deal more complex than the "mutually exclusive nature of the Northern Irish situation in political terms."<sup>3</sup>

In attending to the representation of these complexities, Doherty has used video images and sound to map the paths along which Derry is observed through different gazes. From the window of a moving car speeding along dark unmarked roads, the look implied is that of the terrorist. Straight-on head shots recall both the gaze of the foreign and national press and the voyeurism through which these images are consumed through the media. The camera as a surrogate observer performs conflicting gazes: images of the city are generated from

"outward and downward" perspectives, the same views transmitted by the electronic surveillance devices that "engender mistrust and unease." Are these the colonizing gazes?

What is our relationship to the subject of these different gazes? Can we imagine or project something of ourselves onto these representations? Is there a gaze or a point of view that is unaligned? Does my image of you resemble yours of me? Cameron suggests that "to be a subject in Derry is to have one's freedom to deflect or return the gaze seriously hindered, and, because no one can afford to be indifferent to the gaze of the Other, virtually everyone participates in its discourse of concealing, projecting and imaging a self that is not 'I'."<sup>4</sup> Cameron draws from post-structuralism and psychoanalysis to understand the relationships between Doherty, his protagonist, and the material of his installation. And while Cameron's reflection on the work is considered and thoughtful, addressing how individual freedom in Ireland is curtailed not just by military or judicial control but through the operations of representation (video surveillance, print and broadcast media, etc.), he fails to examine how Doherty's installation also assesses historical concerns about the relationship between self-definition and language in Ireland.

In the seventeenth century immediately after the fall of the Gaelic Order in 1601,<sup>5</sup> a concerted effort was made by the English to change not only the course of government in Ireland, but "to change... their clothing, customs, manner of holding land, language and habit of life." Sir William Parsons, a functionary in the Elizabethan plantations of the ancient province of Munster, concluded that without these changes "it will be otherwise impossible to set them up in obedience,"<sup>6</sup> and he set in motion a process by which indigenous people around the world, including Canada, would experience the confiscation of their land, authority and economies by the colonial power, as well as the attempted annihilation of their languages, cultural practices and forms of judicial and societal representation. Anticipating Parsons, Sir Edmund Spenser, Queen Elizabeth's envoy to Ireland at that time, also commented on the relationship between forms of representation and cultural identity, insisting that "the speech being



The Irish delegation to London, 1921; seated (left to right): Arthur Griffith, E.J. Duggan, Michael Collins and Robert Barton; standing (middle): Gavan Duffy. The treaty establishing the Irish Free State was signed December 6, 1921.



Eamon de Valera (left), first prime minister of Éire, after a meeting at 10 Downing Street on the question of the oath of allegiance to the British Crown, 1932. Right: S.T. O'Kelly.

Irish, the hearts must needs be Irish,"<sup>7</sup> and that the best path ahead for England in Ireland would be to outlaw the Irish language as well as indigenous forms of literature, performance and judicial organization. Again, these strategies were to become the bedrock on which other colonial enterprises in the "new" worlds were to be built.

Doherty's monologue continues playing in the darkened gallery space against this historical background. We hear the man describe how he tracks and targets a potential victim. The voice is calm and collected. The man appears as a terrorist, a cold-blooded, brutal killer, a perfect fit for those tabloid images of child-bombing IRA men favored by the British press. Then, just as we think we "know" him, as we draw on our bank of caricatures and simplistic stereotypes, the man describes the terror he experiences at the thought of becoming an object of public scrutiny and a potential target himself. He has become a victim. And, as if to reinforce this man's new identity, Doherty has him describe how "heartbreaking" he found a recent television broadcast that showed the wife and children of a recent victim grieving at a freshly turned grave. Sympathizing with the family and identifying with the man's own terror, it is difficult to reduce him to the sort of terrorist stereotypes that framed our earlier impressions of him. Indeed, in the wake of his confession of terror and expression of sympathy, the orator seems more like the thoughtful (and indeed sensitive) working-class Republicans featured in Ken Loach or Neil Jordan films, than he does some anonymous tabloid terrorist.

Working against these one-line "explanations" of Irish men is not a simple task when over three hundred years of history have informed our way of looking at Irish people, especially those speaking with identifiable Ulster accents. As far back as the seventeenth century, popular and establishment cultures in England have feasted on images of Irish Savages, as Cherokee artist, activist and critic Jimmie Durham has noted in his book *A Certain Lack of Coherence* (1955). Indeed the first "official savage" to enter into the canon of English literature may well have been an Irishman. Captain Macmorris, a minor character in William Shakespeare's *Henry the Fifth*, is an Irish mercenary in the English army. Macmorris is seen in conversation on the battlefields of

France and offered to the English public as a prototype of Irishness, where instead of featuring as foreigners with distinct language and culture, we have been cast as inferior versions of English people, the perfect foil against which to set off their own virtues. In the following passage from *Henry the Fifth*, Macmorris is portrayed as an immoral, disloyal buffoon, not a Gaelic-speaking man conversing rather fluently in a foreign language but an inarticulate anglophone stumbling his way through pigeon English.



Demonstration against the imprisonment of anti-treaty Republicans by Free Staters in 1923. The Republicans opposed the partition of Ireland.

**Fluellen:** Captain Macmorris I thinke, looke you, under your correction, there is not many of your Nation.  
**Macmorris:** Of my Nation? What ish my Nation? Ish a Villaine? and a Bastard, and a Knave, and a Rascal. What is my Nation? Who talks of my Nation?

Shakespeare's image of Ireland remains a potent one and Spenser's concerns about the Irish character continue to inform how Irish people are seen and understood, not just in Britain, but at home and across the world where the few representations of

Irishness that do circulate are (generally speaking) the products of histories, cinemas or media images with too much to gain from British approval to risk a challenge to British authority. Those of us with television sets, who read newspapers or go to the movies come across modern Macmorrises all the time: as Jim MacDonald, the drunken, wife-battering, ex-British army, under-employed Irishman of Coronation Street fame; as Séan Miller, the lunatic gunman in *Patriot Games*; or as Jude, the fanatical gun-totting terrorist in *The Crying Game*. As propaganda, the devaluing (or outright denial) of cultures pre-dating the imperial expansion has become, with the outlawing of indigenous languages, a commonplace colonial strategy.

Often overlooked in the study of Irish culture (where prominent anglophone Irish writers such as Shaw, Wilde, Yeats and Behan have worked exclusively in the English language), the loss of the Irish language to all but a minority of Irish people continues to impact on our ability to imagine life understood, and lived, apart from England. In a world dominated by language, struggles for self-definition are, in the most part, conducted through the spoken or written word. The power of the Irish language as a space from which to negotiate an understanding of the world in a way not directly mediated by Ireland's historical relationship to England has been repeatedly noted by interested parties on both sides of the divide, with writers as far back as Séathrun Céitinn (born 1570) concerned with the relationship between language of expression and the project of self-determination. An educated man from an old Norman-Irish family, Céitinn was more disturbed by the Elizabethan attacks on Irish culture and language than he was by their military and economic conquests of the island. Céitinn believed that the histories and legislative acts drawn up by the English in an effort to reconstruct Irish culture in an image of England, and without regard for the experiences, values, language and traditions already in circulation on the island, would have long and devastating effects on generations of Irish people if left unchallenged. In anticipation of what was to come, Céitinn wrote the book *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn* (*A Basis for a Knowledge of Ireland*) in order to provide a



*Disclosure I (Restricted Access)*, Willie Doherty, 1996.  
Courtesy of Alexander and Bonin, New York and Matt's Gallery, London.



*Disclosure II (Invisible Traces)*, Willie Doherty, 1996.



*Disclosure III (Superficial Scratches)*, Willie Doherty, 1996.  
Courtesy of Alexander and Bonin, New York and Matt's Gallery, London.

lasting counter-narrative to the growing number of accounts of Ireland written in service of the English occupation.

Ní ar fhuath ná ar ghréath droinge ar  
bioth seach a chéile, ná ar fhuáileamh  
oan duine, ná do shúil d'fháil uaidh,  
chuireas romham stair na hÉireann do  
scríobh, ach de bhrí gur mheasas nár  
bh'oircheas chomh-onóraighe na hÉire-  
ann do chrích, agus comh-uaisle gach  
fóirne d'ár áitigh í, do dhul i mbáthadh,  
gan lua ná iomrádh do bheith orthu.

*It is not for hatred or love of any tribe beyond  
another that I took a hand to write the history of  
Ireland, but because I thought it was not fitting  
that a country like Ireland, for honour and races as  
honourable as every race that inhabited it, should  
be swallowed up without any word or mention to  
be left about them.*<sup>8</sup>

Alert to the power of representation in the struggle against colonization, Céitinn's text hoped to provide the people of Ireland with an account, in the Irish language, of their culture. Not a definitive statement of Irish history, *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn* is an open-ended narrative whose primary purpose was to challenge those images of Ireland and Irishness circulated, in the English language, by Shakespeare, Spenser and their colleagues.

That only a minority of Irish people today claim Irish as their mother-tongue has not lessened the important relationship between language of expression and self-determination in the country, with some of Ireland's best-known anglophone writers addressing the challenges facing them in the expression—through English—of sentiments and ideas, the root of which were often locked in critical reflections of English society. In a passage quoted by Richard Ellman in his 1967 biography on James Joyce, the writer is reported as saying:

In spite of everything Ireland remains the  
brain of the United Kingdom. The  
English, judiciously practical and ponder-  
ous, furnish the overstuffed stomach of  
humanity with a perfect gadget—the  
water closet. The Irish, condemned to  
express themselves in a language not their

own, have stamped on it the mark of their own genius and compete for glory with the civilized nations. The result is then called English literature.<sup>9</sup>

Like Joyce, Oscar Wilde was also alert to the predicament he found himself in as a writer working in English. "I am Irish by



Orangemen's parade, July 12, 1997, Toronto. Photo by Pete Dako.

race" he wrote "but the English have condemned me to speak in the language of Shakespeare."<sup>10</sup>

There is a clear analogy to be made between the representations of Irishness constructed through the English language (commented upon by Wilde, Joyce and C  tinn) and those constructed through the colonizing gaze of the media and security industries in the North of Ireland. Within this framework, I would argue that the character constructed by Doherty in *The Only Good One is A Dead One*, in his refusal to stick with any one assigned identity, can be seen as part of a long tradition of Irish resistance to English colonialism. In commenting that "the real life is the life we do not lead"<sup>11</sup> Oscar Wilde, like Doherty, announces the subversive potential of performance in a world obsessed with knowing just enough about people to control them. In Wilde's most famous play, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1899), each of the four main male characters (Bunbury, Algy, Jack and Earnest)

are discovered to have been impersonating another. In *The Only Good One Is A Dead One*, Doherty's terrorist follows a similar path, moving from victim to terrorist and back again as the continuously playing tape returns to the beginning of the monologue, and we are again exposed to descriptions of assassination assignments, calculated planning, stalking techniques and so forth.

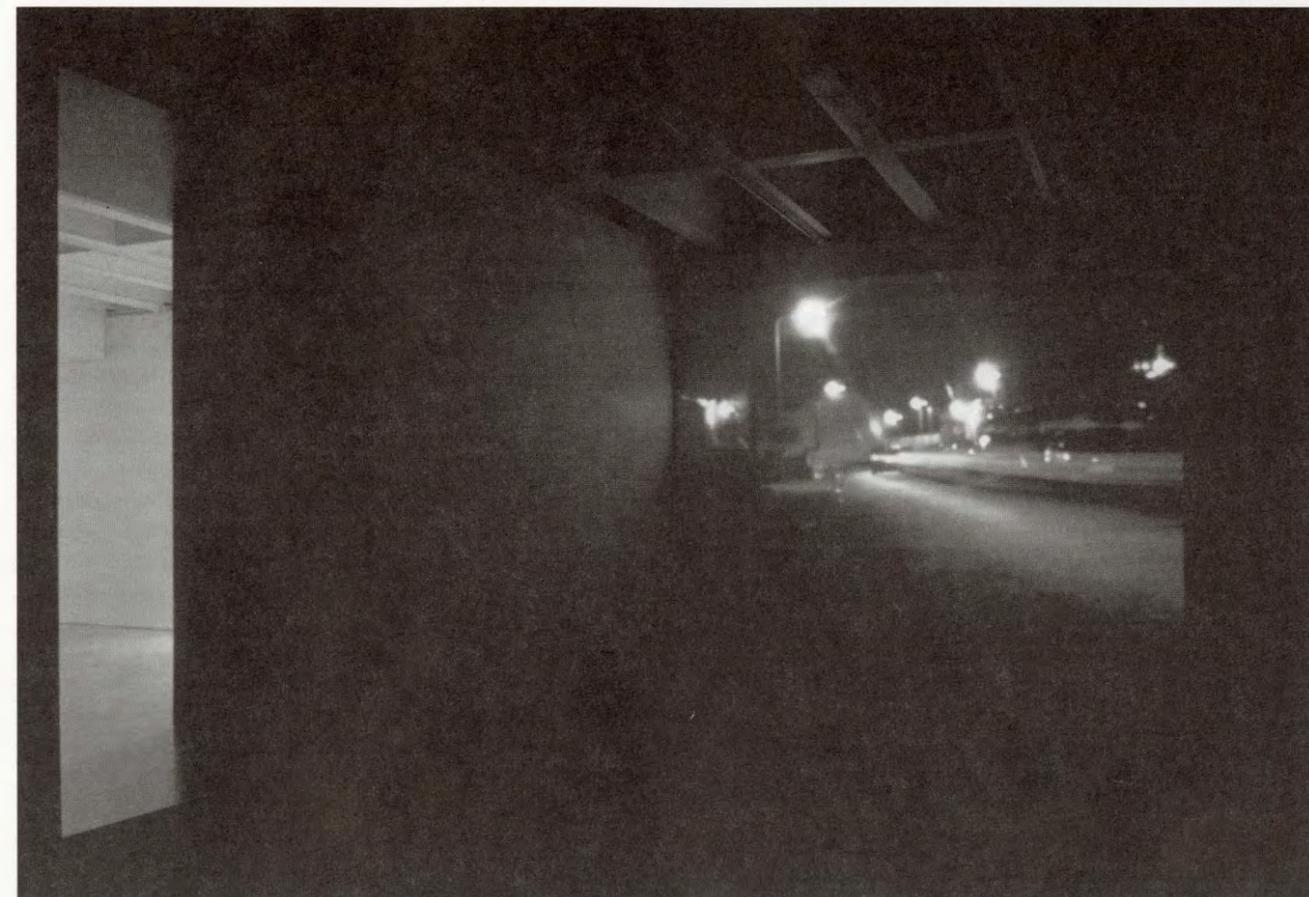
Thinking about the complexity of identity in a place like Ireland caught in its relationship with England, Declan Kiberd wrote:

if Ireland had never existed, the English would have invented it; and since it never existed in English eyes as anything more than a patch-work-quilt of warring fiefdoms, their leaders occupied the neighbouring island and called it Ireland, and, with the mission to impose a central administration went the attempt to define a unitary Irish character....

In opposition to this unitary drive, Doherty's character is always moving from one subject position to another, a practice that reminds us how complicated identity and subjectivity are in the context of a place like Derry, a city of about half

a million people with a long and bitter history of sectarian divide. The conflict in Derry reached a brutal height on January 20, 1972 (Bloody Sunday), when thirteen unarmed Catholic civil rights protesters, marching against internment without trial, were killed near the Rossville flats in the Bogside area of the city by soldiers from the British Army's 1st Parachute Regiment. Grounded in such history, Derry remains a particularly significant site for Irish people from both sides of the political divide and from either side of the border, and as such, is an important signifier in Doherty's installation.

Two wall-sized video sequences are simultaneously projected, from floor to ceiling, on opposite corners of the space. Using point of view shots and available light, Doherty appears to have recorded both sequences at night. Neither tape appears to be edited, and (like the sound tracks) both play continuously throughout the installation. The first sequence has been taped from inside a car parked at the intersection of two residential city streets in Derry. The camera is static and, save for the occasional passing car or pedestrian, the street is relatively free of activity. Recorded with only the available light from sodium street lamps, bicycle lamps and car headlights, the projection is exceptionally dark. There is no corresponding sound, and, save for the occasional car number plate, little detail of the area is visible on the tape. The images from this sequence strongly reference recordings from video



*The Only Good One is a Dead One*, Willie Doherty, video installation. From an exhibition held at the Art Gallery of Ontario, March 12 to June 1, 1997. Courtesy the Art Gallery of Ontario.

surveillance systems, devices prominently posted throughout Derry to monitor the day-to-day movements of the people who live there. The second sequence follows the path of a driver as he quickly drives along a small country road, on the hills outside the city. More like documentary or domestic recordings than images from security cameras or broadcast television, this sequence has been taped from inside the car using a hand-held camera pointed at the road ahead. The occasional appearance of the softly glowing green light from a dashboard-mounted clock, camera shake and low lighting all work to reinforce the amateur (or undercover) allusions delivered by this sequence. The driver/camera-operator appears to be circling the outskirts of the city; in the distance, views of urban street lighting periodically reappear, reminding us that while the road appears rural, the context remains decidedly urban.

Nowhere in either sequence does the protagonist appear. Instead, we have Doherty's camera, the scale of the projections and the point-of-view perspective of the recordings as devices that facilitate imagining ourselves as absence and presence, as both retreating victim and methodical assassin. Nowhere in the installation does Doherty offer us an explanation of the situa-

tions discussed by the protagonist, nor a sectarian perspective on the history that surrounds them. Nowhere does he align the character with an identifiable political or ethnic group. But this is not an apolitical work. Refusing to provide us with the account of a "native informant," while providing the viewer shifting engagement with subject positions is an intensely political strategy. It is a strategy which bears a certain similarity to Decca Aitkenhead's recent description of the an IRA bombing campaign carried out in and around London and the British Midlands.<sup>12</sup> A columnist for the British newspaper *The Guardian*, Aitkenhead proposes that, in making thousands of British commuters "stick in sweaty traffic jams," the IRA are doing historically important work. Quoting a woman inconvenienced by an IRA-prompted train delay, Aitkenhead's column includes the following

statement: "What did the IRA think they were doing, bringing their problems over the Irish Sea to the Midlands? What did it have to do with her?"

Aitkenhead suggests that at least part of the problem with finding a solution to the "Irish Question" is rooted in the kind of attitude demonstrated by this woman. While generally thinking of The Troubles as a terrible shame, few people in England have taken any responsibility for their role in electing a government that sold out the recent (and historic) peace process in exchange for a handful of Unionist votes: an act that only prolonged the inevitable defeat of the Conservative government. Commenting on the general state of apathy toward Ireland in England, Aitkenhead writes:

So while the English indulge in a delicious treat of Dunkirk Spirit ("We won't let the IRA defeat us!" they cry as they endure the calamity of getting to work a bit late), men and women in Ulster continue, as they have for decades, to live their lives under the shadow of military occupation and terrorist threat. They live like this because in the end John Major didn't think it mattered enough and because their fellow Britons have forgotten that it is their problem too. As the IRA make their coded hoaxes, they presumably feel entitled to remind them that it is.

By making us decide who the man speaking the monologue is, Doherty also makes us decide both what his agenda and affiliations might be as well as our own relationship to them. As these are matters few of us with hands-off relationships to the North of Ireland really want to deal with, the work becomes both confrontational and provocative.

Doherty's decision to locate this installation work in the city is another important strategy played out in the work. Choosing an urban context for a work engaged with issues of Irish history is a striking departure from the typical pastoral tendencies of traditional nationalist rhetoric, where an urban intellectual elite continues to promote Irish nationalism as the expression of a rural nation's struggle to gain cultural and political independence from an industrialized England. Since the time of partition in 1921,

the vast majority of people living in the six counties of Northern Ireland, whether Catholic or Protestant, Unionist or Nationalist, Republican or Loyalist, have lived urban lives in cities where identity is not just a matter of ethnicity and religion, but constructed more complexly in relation to issues of class, gender, sexual orientation, education and race. The pastoral rhetoric of the post-treaty years has had good reason to skirt these issues, for in the years immediately preceding the Treaty they were points of identification that brought together men and women from both Catholic and Protestant communities in combined struggles against not just England's legislative jurisdiction over Ireland, but against its imposition of a capitalist economy, limited suffrage and gender inequality on all Irish people regardless of creed or conviction.

Remembering the power of the Labour movement in the first two decades of the twentieth century, Eamon de Valera (the first post-treaty prime minister of Ireland) and other rural conservatives worked to instill in the younger generations a xenophobic nationalism based on ethnicity and faith; a system of belief that would allow the new elite power they never had under British rule, while relegating the urban and rural poor to lives no more comfortable than before. De Valera's idea of a rural Ireland populated by a devout and frugal peasantry has had a direct and lasting impact on the political situation in the North. Faced with the prospect of joining this backward-looking state, which had dismissed from influence the men and women of the Labour, Feminist and Land Reform movements (people like Constance Markiewicz who devoted their lives to establish a new Ireland), people living in the newly constituted Six Counties of Northern Ireland were understandably reticent about their prospects in the new republic. Alienating all but the patriarchal followers of a certain form of Catholicism, the new free State contributed to a new era of sectarianism in Ireland, politically dividing the urban working-class communities of major industrial cities like Belfast and Derry, while encouraging many artists and intellectuals to leave the country for places where state censorship would not limit their work. Today the Catholic and Protestant "ghettos" of Belfast and Derry are among the places most directly effected by The Troubles; they continue to be the chief recruiting grounds for Loyalists and Nationalists and the places most heavily monitored by British intelligence.

While Doherty's installation is not intended as an attempt at an inclusive representation of these multiple experiences of contemporary Irish identity, nor as an inquiry into the historical precursors of the current Troubles, it does create a space where people like me and the British woman inconvenienced by the bomb hoax can rethink our conflicted relationship to competing representations of life in Ireland, and about our own roles in the perpetuation of the myths and institutions that facilitate them. Structured with almost cinematic tension, this work—unlike many of the recent films addressing the North of Ireland—refuses to paint Irish political activists as either barbarous terrorists in service of a fanatical cause, or as simple victims of Britain's continuing colonial enterprise. This allows Doherty's installation to challenge both the authority and currency of these clichéd caricatures for, as full subjects in representation, the protagonists of Doherty's work are neither terrorists nor freedom fighters. Rather, they are the complicated subjects of complex historical, political and discursive circumstances: forces that are not

entirely of their own making, yet paths that continue to be constituted by their actions.

In recalling the analogy between representations of Irishness constructed through the English language (and commented upon by Wilde, Joyce and Céitinn) and those constructed through the colonizing gaze of the media and security industries in the North of Ireland, *The Only Good One Is A Dead One* can be seen both as a site of resistance in the tradition of the Gaels and as a place through which we might know ourselves outside of—or at least apart from—the regulatory operations of colonial representation. In this way Doherty's use of video and sound can be seen as part of a much larger tradition in Ireland where artists, unable to construct representations in the Irish language, have learned to consider all language and representational forms as tools with the potential to facilitate subversive and counter-colonial representations of our conflicting—and shared—experiences as subjects in representation.

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#### Notes

1. Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* (London: Vintage, 1996).
2. See for example *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures* by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, London, 1989.
3. Dan Cameron, "Partial View: Transgressive Identity in Willie Doherty's Photographic Installations" in *Willie Doherty*, exhibition catalogue, Dublin, New York and London: The Douglas Hyde Gallery, The Grey Gallery & Study Centre NYU and Matts Gallery, 1993.
4. *ibid.*
5. In 1601, Hugh O'Neil, the leader of the Irish armies, was defeated by the English at Kinsale, Co. Cork. Shortly after this defeat the remaining Gaelic leaders left Ireland for exile in Europe in what has become known as the Flight of the Earls.
6. Sir William Parsons quoted in Declan Kiberd, *op. cit.*, p. 10.
7. Sir Edmund Spenser, "View of the Present State of Ireland," (1596) published in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing 1*, Derry, 1991.
8. Quoted in Declan Kiberd, *op. cit.*
9. Richard Ellman, *James Joyce*, Oxford, 1967, pp. 10-11.
10. Quoted in Declan Kiberd, *op. cit.*, p. 35.
11. Quoted by Rodney Shewan, *Oscar Wilde: Art and Egotism*, London, 1977, p. 193.
12. Decca Aitkenhead, "Shame of Major's Ulster Betrayal," *The Guardian*, 2 April 1992.

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## Bridging North/South Patterns of Transformation Volume 17, Number 2 (Spring 1997)

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DANS LES RUES DE NARBONNE, OURS DES BALKANS MONTRÉ PAR DES ZINGARAS.

# Interview with Kobena Mercer

by Daniel Yon

DANIEL YON: Your personal history makes you a diasporic subject, if you like. Has that history been significant to the directions your work has taken?

KOBENA MERCER: Yes. My roots are both in Ghana, where my father is from, and in England where my mother is from; I grew up and went to school in both countries. In the mid-'70s my family settled in Britain, which is where I've been based ever since. Growing up I felt that that kind of dual heritage was somewhat idiosyncratic. An interesting thing about the last ten to fifteen years is the way in which these notions of diaspora/hybridity, a travelling theory of globalization, are really commonplace for the post-colonial generations, those born in the late '50s, '60s and afterwards. So that lived experience has definitely informed the work that I've been doing.

YON: And of course those conditions of displacement and diaspora that we now celebrate were not too long ago viewed as crisis. How do you account for this shift?

MERCER: I think it brings a generational shift, a kind of theoretical displacement of an essentialist notion of identity that is homogeneous, linear and unitary. This has been called into question by peoples whose lived experience is one where they have more than one home, more than one location and more than one set of affinities, loyalties and identifications. However, the kind of constructionist emphasis on multi-essential identities, if you look at it historically, would not have been possible without that unifying notion of identity that formed anti-colonial struggle and cultural nationalist revolutions of the '50s and '60s—in my own experience around Black lesbian and gay politics for example. That then leads you into that theoretical part where you're questioning the kind of binary codes and either/or oppositions that really inform the way that identities have been conceptualized previously as being in crisis. In many ways if you look at it in relation to the social movements of the

'60s, it's a bit like the growing maturity of those social movements by subsequent generations who have benefited from them. We are able to take feminism, gay liberation, anti-racism and Black power for granted and work in the spaces in-between in order to extend the broad universal values and goals of those movements in regards to equality and freedom.

YON: What are some of the implications, or what do you think the orientation towards working the "in-between spaces" and building alliances across differences do for community politics?

MERCER: Well, I think that is the big question. That is the big uncertainty that everybody is either trying to come to terms with or desperately running away from. In the immediate moment it calls for modesty in the sense that the disappearance of that grand utopian narrative of liberation required a certain kind of humanity about what is changeable and what isn't. And I don't know whether it's possible to rethink liberalism itself, which is a challenge to many of the generations who define their identities on the side of the left in opposition to a certain kind of liberalism. But, in the immediate, in relation to the underlying economic uncertainties of globalization, de-industrialization and the impact of new technologies, some of the values associated with mainstream liberalism appear to be quite attractive and certainly appear to be values that are well worth defending. Commitment to community or community-building might find a space, if not for growth, at least for sustainable development, around values that may have previously been disparaged.

YON: I want to return to the question of community politics, but for now—globalization does produce the paradox of the emergence of

transnational identifications and hybridity alongside closures and new forms of nationalism. We see this at its worse in ethnic cleansing but there are also the kinds of nationalism that symbolized the recent Million Man March. How are you thinking about this paradox of openings and closures in your work?

MERCER: You have only to compare. On the one hand, you have the sense of optimism that has been generated by the emergence of a new nation in South Africa, the moment of reconciliation following apartheid. Inscribed in the new democratic constitution is the recognition of lesbian and gay rights within civil and human rights. Contrast that to the more defensive and even despairing kind of neo-nationalism that informs one part of the popular appeal as someone like Minister Farrakhan and the Million Man March. In the media coverage of the Million Man March one of the most interesting symptoms or signs that I saw was a placard that said "What Now?" You can understand the importance of the event as expressing a desire for leadership rather than Farrakhan's ability to deliver anything in terms of progressive leadership. What is worrying about the resurgence of neo-nationalism of fundamentalist variety is the way in which it is underpinned by the conservative turn to restore patriarchal power around family values. The kinds of masculinity that the Million Man March was seeking to prioritize and valorize might not be the most progressive for Black men themselves let alone Black women, Black families, or the whole diversity of identities within Black communities. It's in that connection that you can see the prominence that misogyny and homophobia have acquired in Black popular politics; this is also reflected in popular culture—ragga stars like Buju Banton and popular movies like *Menace II Society* and so on. These are attempts to not simply fill in the vacuum that has been created by the political desegregation of Black identities in the post-civil rights period. These are quick fixes that are seeking to bring about a certain kind of male bonding in the face of the challenge to embrace a much wider conception of Blackness.

The internal diversity of Black identities has been a source of strength, which is something that Audre Lorde always addressed in her work about the ethics of difference and working with difference. The unities that are being produced are inherently fragile because they are predicated on

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ  
In The Name Of Allah, The Beneficent, The Merciful.

**As Salaam Alaikum**  
(Peace Be Unto You)

Welcome To The Nation of Islam Online



*The Nation of Islam National Center - Chicago, IL.*

Islam In the New Century  
AN INTERNATIONAL ISLAMIC CONFERENCE HOSTED BY  
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'1995 Newsmaker of the Year'  
Washington, D.C. March 14, 1996  
National Press Club in Washington, D.C.



On March 14, 1996 the Honorable Minister Louis Farrakhan accepted the National Newspaper Publishers Association's 1995 "Newsmaker of the Year Award". In his acceptance speech, Minister Farrakhan responded to the mainstream media's misportrayal of The Million Man March and his successful World Friendship Tour.

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Sections from the website for the Nation of Islam, which is headed by Minister Louis Farrakhan.

virtually repeating the same kind of persecutor in logic and the same kind of paranoid projection that we see underpinning the racist politics and demonization of the new right, in Britain, Europe and in North America, used to such successful effect over the last fifteen years. The challenge is for post-colonial theory to intervene in that and to take account of the much more complex level of unconscious identification which can bring apparent opposites or antagonists into an inadvertent alliance. The kind of homosexual bonding that crosses the lines of race is one of the starkest and most challenging contemporary difficulties that post-colonial theory might want to address.

YON: You alluded to the significance of political economy in cultural studies. How do you address the impression that since the early '80s the political economy backdrop has been pushed further from the stage?

MERCER: Paradoxically, it's the very success of cultural studies, particularly in the U.S. academy, from the late '80s onwards, that has neutralized or dulled its critical edge. Cultural studies as it was being formed in the '60s and '70s in the British context by people like Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall was never a discipline with a stable or fixed identity and as it has become more successful there is a fixity that it has acquired at the cost, perhaps, of that more improvisational edge. That edge has not disappeared completely; I think at its best, the recognition of political economy and of the way postmodern capitalism works through difference rather than homogenization is still there.

YON: Are these developments also related to changes in the nature of race, ethnicity and community politics in Britain? I'm thinking about how a new Englishness is negotiated and about the kinds of work you and others were closely associated with in the '80s—works that Stuart Hall talks about as symptomatic of "new ethnicities," works that "refuse the burden of representation," to quote yourself.

MERCER: Certainly the whole resurgence of Black independent film and video work and the visual arts as a whole over the last five to ten years, with British artists such as Keith Piper, Sonya Boyce, Czarina Binji and American installation artists such as Fred Wilson, Renee Green or photographers such as Lyle Ashton Harris, has

brought about a second Black renaissance, or renaissance of the "Black Atlanta," in Paul Gilroy's phrase. That generation of cultural practitioners has benefited from the early model of cultural studies and its critique of Marxism. One of the more interesting unanticipated aspects of the diaspora effect was the way in which Black British film as well as Black British cultural studies got to be taken up by American audiences both Black and white. Whereas there were many in Britain, in little England, that were quite happy to ignore this and perceived it as a sort of minority phenomenon that would fade away. But, literally, the empire strikes back. The English had to come to terms with and, in fact, appreciate not only the popular pleasure but the value and the emancipatory aspect of living with difference. That has not been an easy passage and you can't understand it without taking into account the more pervasive response of new racism or neo-racism in Britain. Also look at anti-Semitism in the early '90s or construction of fortress Europe whose identity depends on excluding migrants from the Arab world, from Africa, from the Caribbean who've been brought to Europe precisely as a result of the dynamics of globalization. All this shows that the process of having to let go on the part of western European nations of their former imperial identities produces a lot of pain, anguish and suffering. But we can also take into account that there is a moment of reconciliation, or what one might like to think of as reconciliation, that involved a certain kind of cultural mixing, or a certain kind of cultural competence in relation to ethnic difference, becoming part of the common culture as a whole in Britain. It would be a mistake, it would be idealistic, to think that that implies equity and political equality because it often doesn't. But it gives you a margin in which to manoeuvre and in which to open up dialogues.

YON: And does this notion of a common culture composed of differences signal the end of universals or projects that were formulated around principles of accommodation, assimilation and integration?

MERCER: Absolutely. I think the notions of assimilation and integration only have any kind of referential value during that period when these Western nations are quite confident about their cultural or national identities. They assumed that there was this core set of values which minorities would not only have to, but would want to,

assimilate into, that it would be the object of their desire. Through those refusals, resistances and commitment to ancestral legacies, Asian, Caribbean, African communities in Britain have pluralized and hybridized the culture to the benefit of the so-called ethnic majority, even if they're not quite so sure of what their cultural identity is as a result. That has rendered uncertain the kind of political vocabularies of equal rights that helped to delineate a progressive agenda in the '50s, '60s, '70s and so on. This leads to the increasing recognition of difference or the recognition that there is no turning back, that the migrant communities are not going to go back to India or Jamaica or Nigeria any more than women are going to go back into the home or that dykes and queers are going to go back into the closet. These changes are historically irreversible to a certain extent but the downside of that is what was implicit when Stuart Hall was talking about the end of the innocent notion of the essential Black subject in the late '80s; this deals with Black conservatism and Black neo-nationalism and patriarchal gender politics that have been voiced in fundamentalist tendencies within British Muslim communities or within, as I had mentioned earlier in regards to Farrakhan, African and Caribbean communities. We also have to recognize that cultural equality means that Black people are not programmed to produce progressive politics—as if possessing intrinsic essential privilege of difference.

YON: But the suppression of difference and the suppression of sexual politics in projects of political liberation, have, in a sense, rendered Black nationalism intelligible and distinct from those other differences. Is this the kind of practice that you're referring to in your paper in which you theorize homophobia in Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*?

MERCER: Right! Because *Black Skin, White Masks* deals not only with issues of homosexuality but also African and Caribbean Black cultural difference. Is it a question of this surplus having to be marginalized into the footnotes? Where Fanon's more problematic sexual politics rejoins the assumption of Black popular cultural nationalism lies in this notion that homosexuality is a white thing, that it's the other of an authentic African identity. There are two things that demonstrate that there is a kind of mimesis: one—a replication by reversal, by which the counter discourse of revolutionary nationalism repeats the self of a



Audre Lorde in 1987.  
Photo by Joan E. Biron

binary that produced its own oppression in the first place in terms of racialization and then displaces that onto gender and sexuality; two—that it is self-defeating because lesbians and gays have always been involved in Black culture and in Black politics. You think of Bayard Rustin organizing the 1963 march on Washington, in which he was explicitly instructed to downplay his sexual preference. He was out, you know. This is a good four years before the Stonewall moment, but it was as if the logic of unity could not accommodate those differences amongst Black people who contributed significantly to this progressive moment. I think we now recognize that that has been to our cost, and the only people who have suffered, or the people who have suffered most as a result of that, have been ourselves.

YON: Much of the political organizing of those times was understandably predicated on the sense of victimization by history. That practice closed down engagement with ambivalence and internal contradiction, but nationalist projects also produce anxieties in our post-colonial times. Are such anxieties complicated by your reading

of Fanon, who has in some ways become an icon, when questions of sexuality are centred?

MERCER: Well, it goes back to post-colonial responsibility because those anxieties are our own and you need to own them in order to overcome them. Displacing them onto the other by saying that homosexuality is a Western phenomenon is an abnegation of that kind of intellectual responsibility; it doesn't pertain to decolonization on the continent or in the diaspora. There is an obligation to move towards the difficulty, the trouble spots, rather than to run away from them and as I was saying earlier, I don't think it undermines the value of Fanon's work as a whole to want to draw attention to these persistent attachments to conservative sexual politics. Those anxieties get exacerbated when it's felt that one is focusing only on those aspects of Fanon's text, whereas the text is complex and wide-ranging enough for one to be able to highlight certain themes that certainly are to the exclusion of class or the body or of Fanon's thoughts on violence and national culture. The work is only just beginning in that respect.

Politically the thing to do is to embrace our inhumanity in the widest sense, which means moving away from the idea that we are victims of history, that underneath we are all angels and that if it weren't for colonial oppression there would be a state of harmonious equity, mutual respect and so on. It means embracing our humanity and embracing the more pessimistic view that was also a constant in Freud's thinking, because it's not only sexuality that psychoanalysis theorizes but also violence. Psychoanalysis is the intellectual tabloid of Western culture because sex and violence are its constant preoccupations. Understanding our own capacity for violence, regression and destruction and attempting to bring it within sight of the talking cure takes it out of being an unconscious compulsion and turns it into something that we can be aware of and bring into public discourse. It is the only way forward, in terms of understanding sexual violence within Black families, within Black communities. This is not just a lesbian and gay issue but also concerns rape, sexual violence, relationships between parents and children. If we're talking about decolonization, the anti-colonialist idea that we are our own liberators is still true today and the only way in which we can sufficiently address the repetition of colonial violence in an internalized context is to embrace a much more complex multi-dimensional view of the

human psyche or its subjectivity. However pessimistic it may sound, some of the ideas from psychoanalytic theory have a role to play.

The funny thing is that those who have been marginalized even within Black liberation politics have nevertheless contributed twofold not only to Black politics expanding its understanding of sexuality being political, but to lesbian and gay politics in the non-Black communities. This is a curious paradox by which those who do double duty get half the credit; the way in which lesbians in feminist movements work overtime seems to receive lesser acknowledgment, possibly as a result of a certain kind of hetero-normative code within those discourses.

YON: Thinking about populist psychoanalytic, a great deal of identity politics in North America seems to take its cue from the TV talk show format and its liberal therapeutic approach to identity. Your work seems to suggest that this approach might benefit more from a critique of the self, as opposed to the search for the "feel good" effect, as well as a critique of community in which identity politics are constituted?

MERCER: Absolutely! Because the constructionist idea of the self means that it's not, and that identity is not, the responsibility of God and nature, but of the human. It is precisely that ownership of responsibility that is involved in a more progressive kind of self-fashioning—one which recognizes the always incomplete character of identity. Audre Lorde's late work was very much about that. There is no unitary Black feminist identity. What it means is giving up the tautology of the happy ending; because politics is an interminable process there can't be a moment of resolution envisaged as a fixity, or totalization, or stabilization in which all of these processes come to a stop. If there is no dynamic or conflictuality, there is no aliveness, there is no openness to new experience and there is no responsibility towards the other or the self as being other to what it already is or already has been. Maybe it sounds utopian or idealistic to think that that can be used as a guiding political principal, particularly in the era of cutbacks and economic uncertainty and restructuring.

YON: And we don't want to abandon our utopian and idealistic aspirations but if politics are to be engaged as the interminable process, what about those universals upon which many of our social movements are premised?

MERCER: Well, it's more of thinking about an alternative kind of universal, if that isn't a bit paradoxical. It's been the sobering experience of having passed through the late '80s and early '90s in this ferment upsurge in Black Atlantic cultural politics, which may have involved the kind of inappropriate investment of a lot of political hope in cultural artistic movements that couldn't in and of themselves sustain it. The onslaught and the backlash against difference is really one response to global uncertainty. The downward mobility of the middle classes and the whole need for a politics of security is a situation that the right has been able to exploit so well. The challenge is not only short term in trying to envisage what kind of settlement might arise. I suggested earlier that some liberal values are not quite as bad as they were initially thought to be, such as decency and mutual respect. I mean let's not knock it, it's certainly a more healthy alternative to the kind of persecution politics and demonization that seems to be running out of steam.

But in the long run, in terms of imaging possible futures and travelling into those futures, one would also want to be a bit more sceptical towards the kind of boosterism that surrounds the new technologies. There is a sense in which cyberspace might involve a complete liquidation of difference—what difference would your race, your gender or your sexual orientation make when you're dialoguing with people in cyberspace without the need of embodied contact? Also, there are tendencies of replicating exclusionary boundaries within cyberspace—who is going to have access? Who is going to get online? These are really important questions about realistic and achievable futures that will carry those values of respect and of living with difference forward into the future.

Let me say something about this issue of hope and about the idea of responsible disillusionment, because I think one idea about psychoanalytic thinking is that learning and the human capacity for learning and growth depends on the loss of illusion and, in particular, the idea that his majesty the ego has the world at his beck and call. It's precisely the encounter with the limits of oneself that enables you to grow beyond that precarious bristle and defensive notion that you are all-powerful. My utopian wager would be to look at a way of travelling into the future that might use those ideas of responsible disillusionment and of learning to disillusion ourselves, to let go of the illusion of

complete rational control and self-mastering that downplays the need of the other. The fact of interdependence and the fact that we are all interconnected means that you can never be completely sovereign and have the world at your beck and call. That kind of adjustment to one's limits may have progressive potential. It may give us reason to be optimistic. The way in which that is being conveyed with the whole dispersal of the left and the collapse of the idea of socialism as a viable alternative has brought about the downsizing of political expectations, the retreat into the family, into interpersonal relationships. I wouldn't be surprised if the modern primitives movement, the whole interest in body piercing and in self-fashioning, and the interest in pain, which does come about from a lot of sources, is also a response to safe sex and the AIDS crisis. As well, there is an exploration of interior limits and of the interest in ritual initiation and of pain as being this transition to growth and of growing beyond illusory fantasies of being able to change the world at will. These can be seen as important signs of the times. They are in one sense a retreat into this loss of faith in the idea of being able to change the world through rational discourse and debate. But I think what we can salvage from that movement is an idea of responsible disillusionment.

YON: Responsible disillusionment! That's a marvellous concept for a host of reasons but I particularly like it because it is different from cynicism.

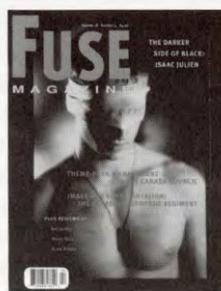
MERCER: Absolutely. Cynicism is a product of the despair that comes about from an all-or-nothing way of looking at the world. If I can't have everything, then I want nothing at all, and that is cynical and, ultimately, self-destructive. Responsible disillusionment means that I may not have it all so I'm going to live with incompleteness. I'm going to live with lack, I'm going to live with the loss of my friends who have died of AIDS and other diseases in the body politic, but I'm going to survive—things live on. Writers like Audre Lorde were aware of this kind of paradoxical continuum and they provide some of the grounds whereby it's reasonable to be optimistic.

*Daniel Yon holds a joint appointment in York University's Department of Anthropology and the Faculty of Education. His forthcoming book on the elusiveness of culture is an ethnography of diaspora, race, identity and schooling.*

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**19:5 FALL 1996**  
Zines, Nets & Outlets by Artists; Ritual Practices by Deborah Root; The Canada Council and The NEA; Pop Goes the Grrrl by Kyo Maclear; Interview with Sunil Gupta; plus reviews of *Intersexions*, Frieso Boning, and more.



**18:4 SUMMER 1995**  
The Darker Side of Black, an interview with Isaac Julien; Theme Park Management at the Canada Council; What the Canadian Airborne Regiment Means to Artists; with reviews of bell hooks, Nancy Nicol and Steve Reinke.



**18:1 FALL 1994**  
Featuring Hair of the Dog? Perspectives on Artists of South Asian Descent in Britain by Sonali Fernando. Atif Ghani interviews curator and writer Ian Iqbal Rashid. Packed with great reviews!



**19:4 SUMMER 1996**  
Richard Fung on Convergence '96; detailed looks at "The OH! Canada Project" by Rinaldo Walcott and Linda Jessup; the "Native Love" exhibition; reviews of Cathy Sisler, J.J. Lee, The American Trip, Berlin Film Festival.



**18:3 SPRING 1995**  
The Haunt of Race: Multiculturalism, Incorporation and Writing Thru Race; Chomsky Speaks; AIDS Testimonials by José Francisco Ibañez-Carrasco; plus reviews of *Guy to Goddess: An Intimate Look at Drag Queens & Ladies Please!*



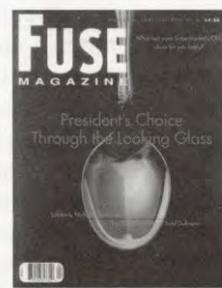
**17:5&6 SPECIAL 1994**  
This is our very special music issue. It features articles on The Changing Space of the Record Shop & an interview with Diggable Planets. Columns include Music in the New South Africa and Hole's Courtney Love.



**19:3 SPRING 1996**  
Futurism, World's Fairs and the Phantom Teleceiver; Cultural Nationalism; Japanese Contemporary Art in the New World Order by Kyo Maclear; José Springer on Canada, Mexico, NAFTA and Culture; reviews of Ron Benner and *Black Noise*.



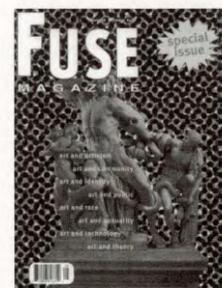
**18:2 WINTER 1995**  
"Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold": Prospects for the Racist Right in Canada; plus Agitative Propaganda; Embodying Shame and Fear: The Effects of Misogyny and Homophobia on Gay Men's Bodies.



**17:4 SUMMER 1994**  
President's Choice Through the Looking Glass: Loblaws, Nichol & Specular Consumption; Talking Cock: Lesbians and Aural Sex — Cynthia Wright interviews Shonagh Adelman; plus Multiculturalism and AIDS: Doing the Right Thing!



**19:1 FALL 1995**  
Kill, Kill, La, La, La: Pop, Punk and the Culture Industry; The Obscenity Chill Continues: Elaine Carol on the Eli Langer Trial; plus reviews of Body-centred Video Art in Halifax, Out on Screen, *AlterNative* and General Idea.



**18:5 SPECIAL 1995**  
A Newer Laocoön: Toward a Defence of Artists' Self-determination Through Public Arts Funding; Michael Balser's Video Art and Activism; Positive (Inter)Action: Responding to AIDS in Montreal; and much more!

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# BETTER YET WHEN DEAD

## Coco Fusco

PERFORMANCE AND INSTALLATION  
YYZ ARTISTS' OUTLET, TORONTO, APRIL 2–APRIL 26, 1997

REVIEW BY ALBERTO GOMEZ

Last year in Buenos Aires, while attending an art opening with some Canadian friends, I had the opportunity to visit the second floor of the headquarters of the CGT (Central Labour Confederation) where the body of Eva Peron was once kept. From the late 1940s until her death in 1952, Evita worked feverishly as the head of a foundation that built hospitals, housing and schools, and provided social welfare for Argentina's poor. After her death in 1952, the second floor of the CGT became the resting place of her body, where Doctor Ara, an embalmer, worked obsessively and methodically to preserve her corpse and reverse the ravages of cancer that had destroyed her still-young body. In 1955, the military overthrew Peron, stole Evita's body from the CGT, and spirited it away to Europe where it was hidden for twenty years. Fearing the immense popularity of Evita when she was alive and worried that Evita's body could serve as a catalyst for resistance, the military sought to eradicate the people's memory of her by "disappearing" the body.

While the second floor of the CGT had been closed to the public since the disappearance of the body, an old Peronista agreed to show me and the Canadian friends the rooms where her body had been kept. He led us to the second floor and unlocked the door. In the antechamber there was still the long table on which her corpse had lain for three years. In the adjoining office the desk, the chair, the wallpaper, the lamp, remained intact. We had entered a sanctuary shrouded in the

past. Nothing had not been touched since Evita's body was stolen. Except for one small detail. In the corner of the room there was a vase filled with fresh flowers.

These flowers seemed to me strangely out of place. I asked the old man why they were there. He explained that during the night the security guards hear voices, laughter. They are sure that it is Evita talking and so they bring her fresh flowers each day. Not only that, he continued, one time during the military regime a photographer came from the United States and wanted to photograph the office. He told us that he didn't want to give her access to this place, or let her take pictures. But he couldn't say anything because the military were in power and they controlled everything. The military ordered him to open the office and let the American woman in. However, when she went to develop the photographs not a single picture turned out. The photographs were blurry and muddy with a strange black mark that floated across each frame.

Several weeks ago, I encountered another, and very different, shrine to the memory of Evita. At YYZ Artists' Outlet, American writer and performance artist Coco Fusco had transformed a part of the gallery into a gothic space of mourning. The walls were covered in thick black velvet and the liturgical chants of the rosary filled the room. Against one wall was placed an elaborate white lined silver coffin heaped with red roses. On the opposite wall, five shrines to famous and dead Latin American women, including Evita,

were erected. Short texts written in the style of rosary prayers were paired with small pedestals on which objects were placed to commemorate their deaths. Traversing historical time and the breadth of the continent, Fusco's acts of homage were united through her use of these objects to represent each woman's artistic contribution and through her incorporation of each woman's thoughts on death within the rosary texts. Besides being dead and famous, what connected these women in the context of Fusco's installation was the untimeliness of their demise.

Selena, the pop star singer killed by a overzealous fan, was memorialized by a glass bust sporting a black bra. Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz, colonial Spanish America's most famous baroque poet, who eventually renounced writing and died administering to plague victims, had as her talisman a quill feather pen. Evita, the Argentine radio actress who rose from humble beginnings to become the most powerful woman in Argentina's history before she died of cancer, was coupled with a 1940s microphone. Frida Kahlo, the Mexican painter and wife of muralist Diego Rivera, who struggled with constant pain and fought tenaciously for life after a tram accident left her with a crushed spine at the age of seventeen, was represented by a paint brush. Ana Mendieta, the Cuban-born performance artist whose body/earth/ritual works fused the influences of santería and feminism and who died from a fall from the thirty-third storey window of the apartment she shared with her husband Carl

Andre, had as her dedication two small glass bowls filled with mud and blood.

For two afternoons during the three week installation/performance, Fusco covered herself in mud and lay deathly still in the coffin. A booklet of rosary prayers providing further information on the women she had chosen to commemorate was handed to spectators by her pious accomplice, a nun. As a necrophiliac gesture of solidarity with the women she had enshrined, Fusco's presence as a live corpse did not alter the essential chemistry of the installation. Nor did the nun's offering of a booklet of rosary prayers. Central to Fusco's campy reverence was a slippage between an ironic commentary on these women's posthumous fame, and a feminist critique of patriarchy's refusal to recognize their cultural contribution when they were alive. The effect of this slippage was a fetishization of death that risked reinforcing the mechanisms of popular culture and patriarchy she set out to critique.

Casting her heroines as martyrs to feminism, Fusco succeeds in distinguishing their place in the pantheon of popular culture's icons from, say, the ubiquitous busts of Elvis. Yet by representing their lives and deaths as tragic, she reproduces a stereotype of women, and specifically Latina women, as victims that undermines the power these women embodied in their work and in the memories they engender. She offers a tongue-in-cheek intervention on behalf of these women's salvation, but does so by conflating a Latin American cult of the dead with a North American cult of celebrity. In many societies death is not seen as an ending but a beginning, a dream, a voyage, a birth, a reunification with an ancestor, an arrival at a new land. Yet for a North American audience, at least for *Globe and Mail* reviewer Gillian MacKay, Fusco's visual code "suggests the way in which death—especially a violent one like that

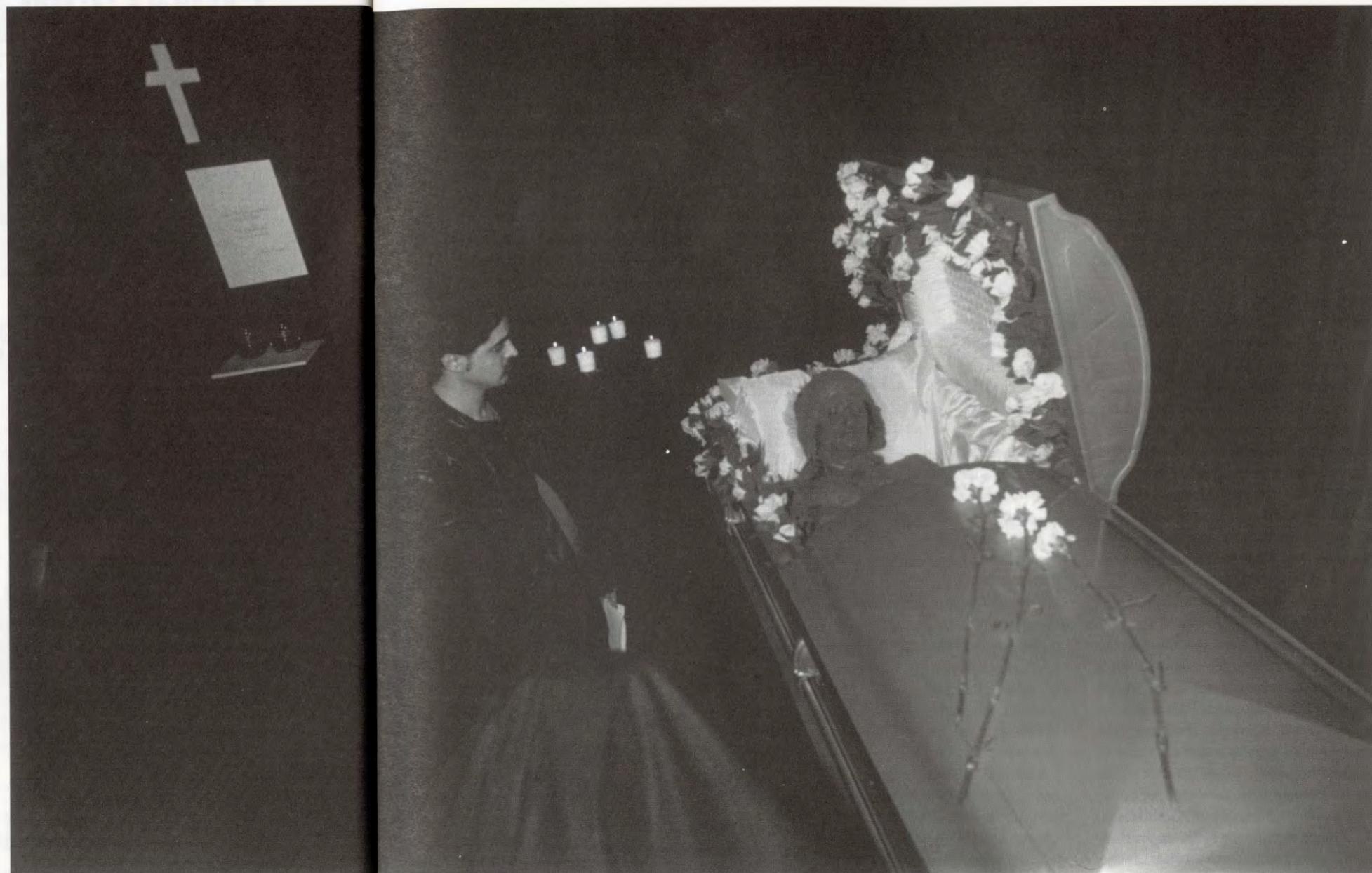
of the Latina pop star Selena—fuels the cult of celebrity."

In so doing, Fusco's performance/installation raises some important and unresolved questions around the representation of collective memory and cultural difference. For to play with the visual iconography of death in a North American context can as easily silence as redeem the materialization of histories and memories that lie outside the purview of dominant culture. Take for example the icon of Evita. In North America, she is the star of a musical. She is Madonna's double. Her meteoric rise as a charismatic political force is charted as a soap-opera saga of sleeping your way to the top. In Argentina, on the other hand, her ascendancy to power charts the emergence of a political project of radical populism. The strength of her memory is intimately intertwined with a history of resistance and military repression that claimed the lives of a generation of Argentine activists.

In the 1970s, the Montoneros, a left Peronista urban guerrilla, took as their *consigna* (slogan), "*si Evita viviera, sería Montonera*" (if Evita had lived, she would have been a Montonera). It was the deep emotions evoked by the collective memory of Evita's political project and her work while she was alive, and not the byzantine story of her body's disappearance, that led the Montoneros to adopt her as their patron saint. Yet in the booklet of rosary prayers that Fusco provides for the viewer in her installation, it is the corpse of Evita and its ill-fated destiny that is the focus of her canonization. Stating in her Rosary prayers for Evita that the Montoneros kidnapped General Aramburu in demand the return of her body, Fusco elides the historical process of the political struggles of the late 1960s/70s. Contrary to her claims, Aramburu was kidnapped by the Montoneros for his role in the 1955 coup

against Peron and his crimes against humanity, including the torture and murder of the Peronista resistance. His execution was a vindication of these people's struggle for social justice and not a retribution for the disappearance of a body.

As political and historical actors, the Montoneros were careful to distinguish life from death. Fusco is not so discriminating. Applying a postmodern patina to a



Coco Fusco performing *Better Yet When Dead* at YYZ Artists' Outlet, Toronto. Photo by Pete Dako.

European framework of sin and redemption, Fusco ends up emptying her icons of historical context and memory of its potency. When Evita lay on her deathbed, the oligarchy of Argentina rejoiced at her political demise. Meanwhile, in poor barrios throughout the country, people erected spontaneous altars and prayed for her health. Placing her picture beside those of the saints and Jesus, they promised penance to save her life. At the same time, miraculous apparitions of

Evita appeared in different places. Nobody can prove that this happened, but the people said it was true.

From this belief in collective memory emerges the difference in the two acts of homage to Evita that I encountered. At the worker's shrine in Buenos Aires, the cult of the dead evokes life. A collective act of remembrance commemorates the entanglement of history and identity and resistance. At Fusco's shrine at YYZ, life is

chained to the finality and celebrity of death. An artistic gesture of remembrance severs the relationships of identity to history and resistance. To bridge and not exacerbate the differences between these two representations of collective memory is not only an issue for the historical record, but one of contemporary cultural and political debate.

*Alberto Gomez is a writer and artist living in Toronto.*

# CITY ON THE VERGE OF NERVOUS BREAKDOWN

## City at the End of Time: Hong Kong 1997

ARTISTS AND WRITERS FROM HONG KONG, CANADA AND THE U.S.

PRESENTED BY THE POMELO PROJECT

VANCOUVER, FEBRUARY 14–MARCH 15, 1997

REVIEW BY KUAN FOO

The Hong Kong of the imagination has always loomed far larger than the 400 square miles the territory actually encompasses. More than any other place in the world, Hong Kong has always seemed a creation of outside observers trying to shape it to conform to one idea or another. Once seen as the exotic land of sampans, tin toys and cheong sams is now grudgingly admired as an economic miracle of cell phones, and multi-nationals, Hong Kong has always existed on the boundary of extremes: British, Chinese; Orient, Occident; colonialism, communism.

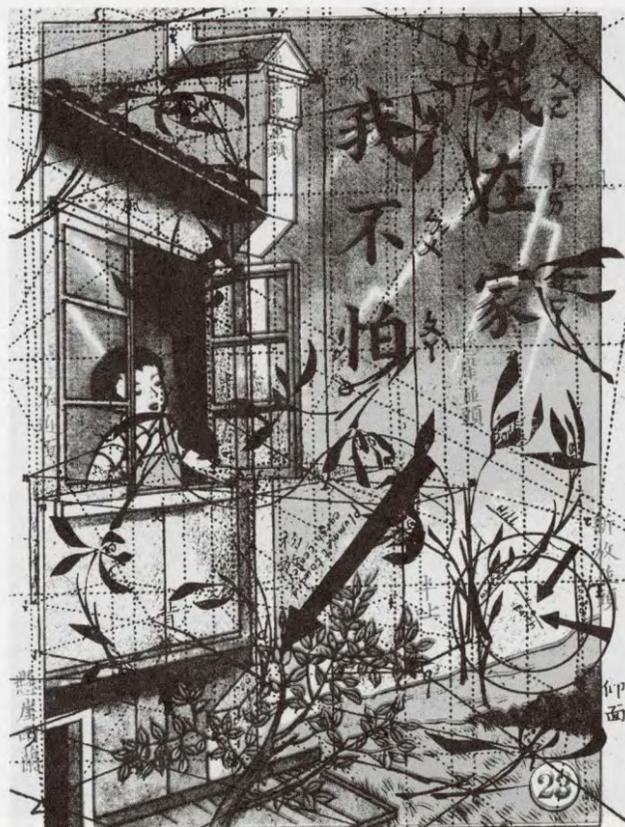
As it sits on the verge of returning to China, Hong Kong is in our minds more than ever, its colonial past and uncertain future creating ideological dialectics that are difficult to resist. Business leaders pay daily lip-service to the importance of maintaining civil liberties while assuring investors in Canada that “business will continue as usual.” Political ideologues take the opportunity to tout the evils of communism or celebrate the end of colonialism depending on their political stripe. Meanwhile, the entertainment world has seen a surge in interest in Hong Kong pop culture that borders on fetishization. Schlocky martial arts flicks are analyzed through the filter of Western scholarship and are enthusiastically touted as idiot-savant masterpieces. Jackie Chan fights his way to our cineplexes and now Wong Kar-Wai and Tsui Hark roll easily off the tongues of art house geeks as once did Goddard and Truffaut. Through all the scrutiny that Western media has focused on this tiny territory, it is very easy to lose sight

of Hong Kong as an entity unto itself, with an energy and identity all its own.

It was the need to present a fuller picture of Hong Kong’s cultural identity that inspired the Pomelo Project to produce *City at the End of Time: Hong Kong 1997*, a series of artistic and literary events that ran from February 11 to March 15 at various locations around Vancouver. Artists and writers from Hong Kong, Canada and the U.S. were invited to present their perspectives on this important international port in a year of great change and uncertainty. The visual art component of the show was drawn from the work of five artists—two from Canada, three from Hong Kong—each exploring his or her own unique relationship with this changing colony.

A mood of oppression pervades Choi Yan-Chi’s installation, an oppression that stems from the British colonial past of Hong Kong and looms ominously from the

government in Beijing. Her installation, aptly titled *Past/Future*, recreates a Hong Kong schoolroom complete with rows of perfectly aligned desks and a rack of workbooks containing rote copying exercises of Chinese and English characters. On the front desk sits, not a teacher but a television playing a video loop of Hong Kong students raising their hands in mindless synchronicity and repetition. In her artist’s talk, Choi indicated that the installation is modeled after a “Band Five



*Come Home For Dinner*, Lee Ka-Sing, 1997, ink jet on canvas, 76 x 102 cm.

School,” which, under the British colonial school system means that the students in the video are those who have the lowest test scores and are regarded as having the least promising futures. However, existing in stark contrast with all the enforced conformity are life-size colour reproductions of actual desktops that are hung along the walls of the gallery. These are decorated with drawings, swear words, song lyrics, love notes—trite, yes, vandalism, to be sure, but also the secret and forbidden language of Hong Kong youth culture defying the rigid structure that has been placed upon them. It is this self-expression that is gradually squashed by the rigidity of a system that classifies and defines opportunity by educational aptitude. Choi’s installation speaks poignantly of the plight of the educationally challenged in a society that regards education at a premium as well as hinting at the dangers to come from an incoming government that has already begun placing limits on free expression.

By contrast, a sense of fun, almost frivolity, pervades Lee Ka-sing’s *Foodscape*. A collaboration with Hong Kong poet Leung Ping-kwan, *Foodscape* combines ten poems (in Chinese with English translation) with a corresponding digitally printed canvas that, in the words of the artist, do not simply illustrate the poems but rather attempt to translate them into visual energy. The canvasses themselves are sometimes bewildering swirls of images layered upon each other. Printed in black and red, they betray a broad range of source material: postage stamps, star charts, product advertisements, traditional Chinese calligraphy, medieval maps, instruction manuals. The poems range in tone from humorous to nostalgic but all are centred on food and how it pervades culture and memory until the smell or taste of a particular morsel or beverage can trigger near mythical associations:

...Pour the tea  
Into a cup of coffee, will the aroma of one  
Interfere with, wash out the other? Or  
will the other  
Keep its flavour: foodstalls by the roadside  
Streetwise and worldly from its daily  
stoves  
Mixed with a dash of daily gossips and  
good sense,  
Hard-working, a little sloppy... An indescribable taste.

from *Tea-coffee*  
by PK Leung  
transl. by Martha Cheung

As Leung himself jokes, the whole project begins with food, but through demonstrating the importance of food to recollection and desire, the final destination of *Foodscape* is in cultural identity.

Jamalie Hassan takes the more global view of Hong Kong as a port city linked to other ports through migration and commerce. In her installation, *Not Unlike Hong Kong*, she specifically plays on connections between colonial Hong Kong and another seaport, the formerly colonial Bombay. Her installation, mounted in the front windows of the Access Gallery, consists of three elements: slide projections of historical scenes of the two ports, souvenir bamboo ships adrift in a sea of shredded paper, and the following three statements printed on the windows in English, Arabic, Hindi and Chinese:

The Bombay shipyard was a linchpin of expansion in the Far East.

The treaty ceding Hong Kong to Britain was signed on a Bombay-built ship.

The Bombay built “China Clipper” was the backbone of the lucrative opium trade.

By drawing linkages between the creation of Hong Kong as a colonial entity and the

trafficking of opium in boats that were themselves manufactured at a colonial outpost, Hassan emphasizes how commercial considerations defined the historical patterns of colonialism, and how little these patterns have changed in the succeeding ninety-nine years.

It is somehow appropriate that after viewing Hassan’s work in the windows of the Access gallery that the viewer then enters to find Desmond Kum Chi-Keung’s installation *Door*, filling the inner space. This is because Kum’s work is essentially introspective; rather than making the broad statement on colonialism and global relationships that Hassan does, he instead draws on the sense of entrapment felt by those in Hong Kong who are apprehensive about the transition but who are powerless to resist or escape.

Kum takes as his inspiration “Bird Alley,” a now-demolished street in Hong Kong where hundreds of elderly bird lovers came to relax, socialize and display their prized pets. Some observers have said that the relationship with land in Hong Kong is one of commodification rather than of sentimental or even patriotic attachment. “Bird Alley” is a profound exception, representing a space that, for a time, transcended commodification. However, as Kum seems to indicate, it is the relentless reduction of land into commercial terms that leads to the destruction of spaces such as “Bird Alley” and that also provides the wealth that paradoxically provides some residents with a doorway of escape.

By stacking hundreds of small, bamboo bird cages into a six foot high horseshoe, Kum references not only the clustered apartment blocks that house much of Hong Kong’s population but also the squalid residences of the “cage men,” the lowest of the lower classes who reside in spaces half the size of a bunk bed. The cages face inward, forcing the



*Door*, Kum Chi Keung, 1996, bamboo bird cages, audio, newspaper clippings. Photo by Michael Paris.

observer to enter the claustrophobic installation in order to examine it closer. Once "inside," it can be observed that many of the cages are open, the occupants having literally flown the coop; indeed, in an earlier incarnation of *Door*, Kum actually released birds from the cage to fly free. Many of the cages also have little signs mounted on them, which on closer examination are revealed to be listings for exorbitantly priced Hong Kong real estate. Meanwhile, from the outside the sounds of birds chirping hint at the escape and freedom of those able afford it.

Cages also form a major component of Mary Sui-Yee Wong's installation, *The Cage Maker*. Here, however, it is the cages themselves that have "flown the coop," dozens of them hung at various heights on invisible thread. Lit only by a few dangling orange bulbs, the wire cages hover like spectres in the half-light, throwing fuzzy amber shadows on the walls. They float alone in isolation, their inhabitants trapped and cut off from each other. Scattered like dead leaves across the floor and the bottoms of some of the cages are fabric prints of family photos and news articles on Hong Kong. The Gallery is otherwise empty except for a small chair and bed frame made of fragile looking wood. The overall effect is mesmerizingly beautiful.

Wong, who was born in Hong Kong, immigrated to Canada at the age of seven. *The Cage Maker* is her attempt to explore the shadowy memories she has of her birthplace, the sparse furnishings of the room a direct reference to the room she remembers from her childhood. The cages speak of the physical and psychic dislocation of the immigrant—sealed off from her familiar surroundings and suspended in a vacuum of unfamiliarity—who is forced to reconstruct her own identity. Wong compares Hong Kong's transition to a form of

*The Cage Maker*, Mary Sui-Yee Wong, 1997, cages, lights, photographs. Photo by Michael Paris.



"forced migration," the population becoming, in effect, foreigners in their own country where the preconceived rules of behaviour and notions of identity will no longer apply.

It has been said that during the fall of the Roman Empire the last artists left were the chroniclers. While the coming transition in Hong Kong is hardly the collapse of an empire, the need to chronicle that which may be ending, or at least profoundly changing, is no less immediate. In the end, the visual art component of *City at the End of Time: Hong Kong 1997* succeeds in presenting a glimpse of the cultural dynamics of Hong Kong that goes beyond the popular media stereotypes of wealth and exoticism. It is a shame then that this small insight comes so close to the date of the transition itself and we in the West are now only able to watch as the thing we imagined Hong Kong to be spirals closer and closer to rebirth.

*Kuan Foo* is a Vancouver writer, musician and *Ultimate* player.

## (BE)LONGING

Ellen Pau, Laiwan, Xui Li Young, Yau Ching

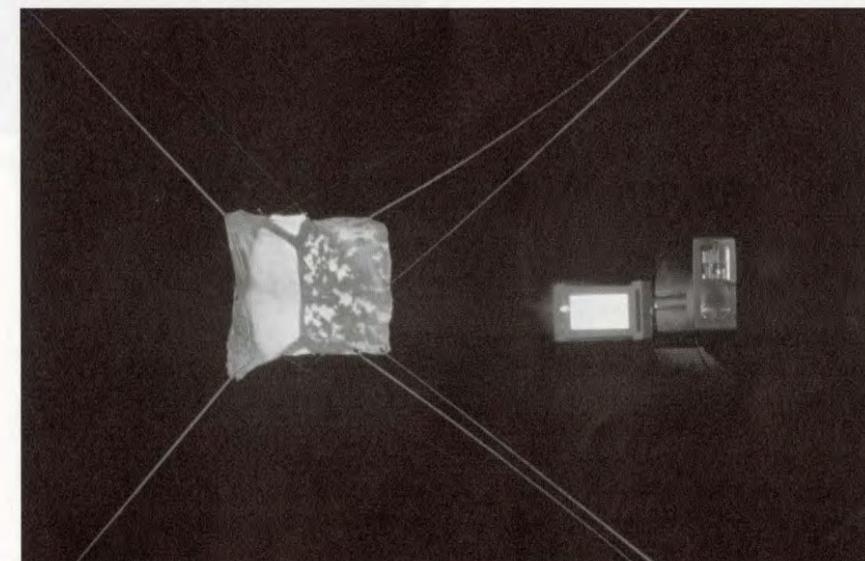
CURATED BY MARY SUI YEE WONG

GALERIE OPTICA, MONTREAL, APRIL 26–MAY 31, 1997

REVIEW BY ALICE MING WAI JIM

On the eve of Hong Kong's return to China scheduled for June 30, 1997, curator Mary Sui Yee Wong brings together four women artists of Chinese descent from different geographical locations to re-examine notions of cultural identity in the exhibition "(Be)Longing." In exploring this theme, the works by Yau Ching (Michigan), Ellen Pau (Hong Kong), Xiu Li Young (Montreal), and Laiwan (Vancouver)—ranging from video and performance to multi-media installation—embody artistic responses to technology in their conception and realization providing a subtle subtext that further unites the exhibition as a whole.

In *Diasporama: Dead Air*, Yau Ching, a U.S.-based videomaker born and raised in Hong Kong, uses the electronic medium of video to address issues around the diasporic condition such as nationhood and the notion of home in the context of the political changes Hong Kong is currently undergoing. Through seven informal interviews, the eighty-seven minute documentary poignantly records the experiences and opinions of Chinese from Vancouver, Toronto, Taipei, Hong Kong and New York, capturing the fluidity and changeability of cultural identity as a result of constant transnational migratory movements. Technology here is engaged as a tool of resistance against the social erasure of Hong Kong people before, during and after the British colony's hand-over to China, despite the promise of "one country, two systems." Subtitled in English presumably for a hegemonic white audience, the documentary also



*I can only talk to strangers about this*, Ellen Pau, video installation, mixed media. Photo by Paul Litherland.

questions notions of cultural translation in representations of the Other through electronic means.

Hong-Kong-based video artist Ellen Pau's *I can only talk to strangers about it*, the third installation in her *Pik Lai Chu* series, continues this exploration of the electronic image but as cultural mediator. Entering a pitch dark room, the viewer is immediately drawn to a video loop showing the artist seated with her back to the viewer banging the top of her head at fifteen second intervals. This image is first projected onto a dusty mirror, which in turn reflects it onto the layer of latex stretched across the entrance of the installation space with pieces of red string. Peeled from the artist's back and containing her skin graft

and hairs, this latex brings in a corporeal element as a counterpart to the digital representation of the artist while the mirror, framed in roughly cut wood painted red to resemble a smaller version of a Chinese earth god temple or ancestral tablet, evokes a temporal dimension that contrasts the monotony of the moving image. As the repetitious thump of the artist's head interrupts the noise of a busy highway under construction, a sinister feeling of isolation overcomes viewers when they realize that the sound echoes that of their own heartbeat, yet another incorporative element of the body. Pau's *I can only talk to strangers about it* suggests the inability of the electronic image, or technology in general, to fully mediate corporeal reality existing in the material

world. This impasse also reflects the way members of the diasporic community find it difficult to relate to their roots and traditions even when they return to their originating cultural environment, an unmistakable reference to the destabilization and emotional distress currently experienced by diasporic Hong Kong Chinese in the reunification of Hong Kong to China.

In the performance piece *Kuei Mei* (*Converting Maidenhood*), Montreal artist Xui Li Young questions the location of the desiring body in a world that is becoming increasingly digitized. Using symbolic elements from the I Ching (an ancient book on the classical Chinese oracle of change) within the context of the AIDS pandemic, this work calls for a transformation away from the categorical division of the body into natural and digital systems toward a functional commensurability between the two in order to avoid a situation where one is socially or culturally rejected. The performance consists of the artist, clothed in a white night gown and equipped with four pressure sensitive sensors, two on each hand, entering a white ephemeral tent where she gives the supine model inside a cybermassage. Through this sensorial experience of touch, bits of information are sent to the computer which digitizes and transforms them into sounds. The digitized sound samples and melodic series produced by the computer is based on the DNA structure of the Human Immunodeficiency Virus while vocal samples were taken from readings of the I Ching. In its sterility of presentation, *Kuei Mei* also speculates on the new ways in which sexuality and sensuality will be expressed in the future in light of technologies being developed to contain purity and contamination.

Perhaps the work most subtly linked to technology is Zimbabwe-born Laiwan's *She who had scanned the flower of the world's manhood* after a poem by Sappho. In this



*Kuei Mei* (*Converting Maidenhood*), Xui Li Young, performance/video installation. Photo by Paul Litherland.

multi-media installation, a series of paired images form a horizontal line on two adjoining walls of the gallery. Each pair is made up of fresh and dried vegetation mounted in glass slides followed by a digital print of the slide. Underneath the scanned images are poetic captions in the feminine voice about the celebration of nature in all its simplicity and beauty, a stark contrast to the more pervasive materialistic approach to the earth's resources in today's technology—and economics—driven culture. As the flora in each slide mold, dry and rot day by day during the exhibition, it becomes apparent that the digital image has failed to capture the essence, or lived reality, of the flora that stems from within a natural process of transformation. Moving away from a definition of representation as a singular act unto itself to that of a continual process in which the recording of natural change takes precedence, the installation allows for a more representative articulation of the subject, diasporic or otherwise. In this way, like Young's performance, Laiwan's *She who had scanned the flower of the world's manhood* seeks to find a balance between the natural world and the digital world, one in which we can live out our expressions unhampered by the complexity of technobabble while at the same time be serviced by it in our projects.

While the handover of Hong Kong to China in 1997 may be perceived by some as the loss of identity for Hong Kong people resident or expatriate, the works in "(Be)Longing" suggest that current notions of cultural identity may be rapidly collapsing as more and more technological apparatus infiltrate the politics of representation and re-define concepts of borders, nations, and locations of the social and cultural body. In effect, these works suggest that we need to re-define first what it means to be living within a diverse global community that is at the brink of an electronic age before we isolate ourselves within our individual communities. What, for example, are the benefits, drawbacks and compromises involved in this period of transformation and how do they affect current definitions of being? "(Be)Longing" puts forth that perhaps a sense of belonging, or the longing to be, is not to be found in the mediation of proven dysfunctional systems but in a better understanding of the emerging communications systems being developed around our technosphere today.

*Alice Ming Wai Jim is a freelance writer and historian living in Montreal. She is currently doing independent research on artistic responses to the 1997 Hong Kong handover.*

## NOTES ON "SCOPING BOYS" AND "SCOPING GIRLS"

### Scoping Girls and Scoping Boys

GIRLS: SHONAGH ADELMAN, KATHLEEN PIRRIE ADAMS AND ERIN MOURÉ IN CONVERSATION, JANUARY 18, 1997

BOYS: ANDY FABO, TOM KALIN AND MIKE HOOLBOOM IN CONVERSATION, MARCH 15, 1997

ORGANIZED BY GALLERY TPW, TORONTO

CO-SPONSORED BY GALLERY TPW AND THE TORONTO CENTRE FOR LESBIAN AND GAY STUDIES

REVIEW BY ROBERT LEE AND LEE RODNEY

Continuing with a Queer focus, Gallery TPW brought in 1997 with a series of exhibitions and panels that stressed scopophilia and the place of eroticized bodies in contemporary Queer visual culture. Shonagh Adelman's 1993 photographic series, *Skindeep* (Jan. 16–Feb. 15), started off the year, followed by an exhibition which brought together Andy Fabo's diptych series, *The Somniloquist* (1996) and Tom Kalin's video, *I hung back, held fire, danced and lied* (1995), (Feb. 27–March 29). And if scopophilia has most often been theorized in the domain of cinema, it equally has its counterparts in other social spaces: the art gallery and the night club, their similarities drawn out by the "informal, informative, witty and conversational" panels on these exhibitions held at one of the better Toronto venues for the Queer scopophile, Tallulah's Cabaret. Panelists included Kathleen Pirrie Adams, Shonagh Adelman and Erin Moure in January; and John Greyson, Andy Fabo, Mike Hoolboom and Tom Kalin in March.

Though we tried to make our own report equally conversational, the witty informality faded fast when we found ourselves caught in a perennial trap, looking for that elusive point linking the girls' and boys' panels/exhibitions. And, as you might expect, we didn't find it. At least twenty years of preamble (social and theoretical) led up to the production of the works exhibited and discussed, and each panel reflected the complexity of its own historical trajectory. We found ourselves back in binary land arriving at a seemingly obvious conclusion: these well-trodden



Still from *I hung back, held fire, danced and lied*, by Tom Kalin, 1995, video, 5:00 min. Still courtesy of V Tape.

paths meet only where they have both been marred by censorship, otherwise the politics of looking shifts with the sexed body in the frame. The following remnants are pieced together from several meandering e-mail discussions.

#### Rob begins with the boys...

Andy Fabo and Tom Kalin have been making work about AIDS for close to a decade now. Their current work is layered, complex and personal. Kalin's video references the names of friends who have died of AIDS, and Fabo has culled images from family albums and friends. Both use collage and montage to create meaning, acknowledging that one small part is not enough to capture the whole story. This exhibition comes at a time when the anger of activist work is years behind, and the hope of new drugs is within sight. Fabo and Kalin attempt to make sense of a present affected by memories of loss, while

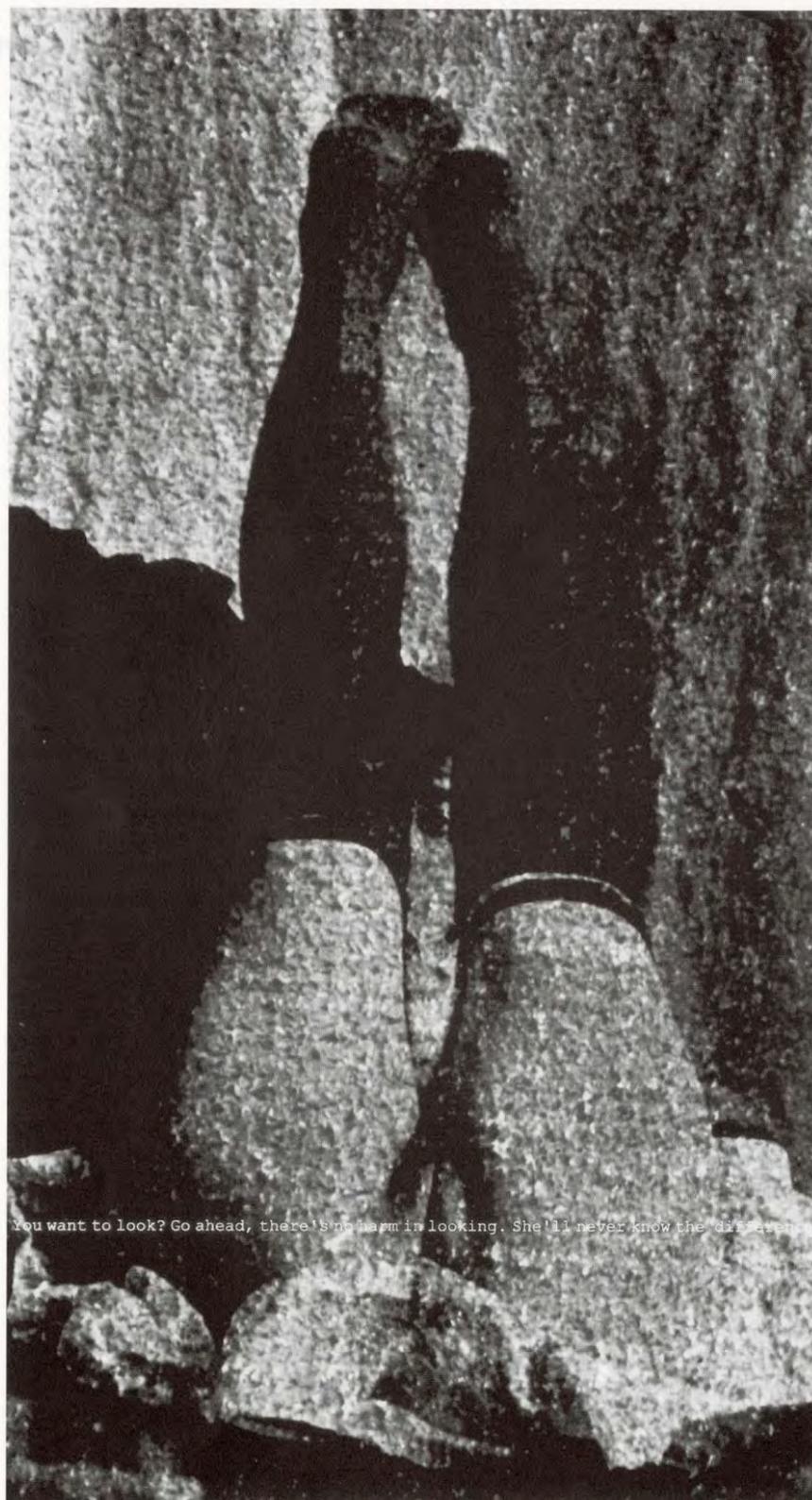
forging new ways of celebrating and eroticizing our living bodies in the present.

Fabo and Kalin's works are kaleidoscopic collages of images and words (and music in Kalin's case) that combine personal and found imagery. They use a type of subjective documentary to investigate loss and memory in personal and collective histories.

It also seems particularly appropriate that the three artists featured at TPW this winter engage photographic sources to interrogate looking and the meaning invested in the images we look upon: Adelman's work ties in here. Although in the boys' case, the photograph acts as an aid to memory: it helps us to look back and hold on to a lost moment at the same time. I think that this is why photographic sources are so evocative when dealing with losses such as those we see with AIDS.

#### Lee continues...

The boys' panel and show was interesting for me because the work wasn't so caught up in irony—although I guess it's pretty hard to be ironic when dealing with loss (if one ignores General Idea). I think it's still really tricky for women to work with pictures of naked women (appropriated or otherwise), as less than a decade ago



*Grascunt*, from the series "Skindeep," Shonagh Adelman, 1993, computer generated cibachrome print, 213 x 122 cm.

the good feminist answer was to drop the female body out of the frame altogether because of its historical baggage and that essential fear of essentialism. Similarly there wasn't much talk about sexual agency due to the politically paralyzing notion of "objectification." I think *Skindeep* flies in the face of these fears, mutating the slickness of the pornographic image in the process.

Objectification seems like a non-issue now, and I think that lesbian SM—both in theory and practice—has done a lot to make people think differently about the dynamics of scopophilia. I also think that appropriative strategies (and the ironic gloss that comes with appropriation) eases "the burden" of representation for women imaging women. It seems that lesbians often have kind of an oblique, love-hate relationship with mainstream porn. During the panel discussion Kathleen Pirrie Adams described the situation quite succinctly when she referred to porn as the "phobic object" of feminist theory. It seems as if the body is always already "pornographic" in Western culture on some level as it's figured as the locus of sexuality. This begs the question as to what kind of bodies (or images of bodies) define what we recognize as Queer work.

#### Rob returns...

Tom Kalin raised this point at the boys' panel when he mentioned that his work had sometimes been left out of gay and lesbian film festivals because it wasn't "gay enough"—the suggestion being that the material, sexualized body is the only means by which desire can be represented. In dealing with memory and loss, the desired body can be made present through its very absence, as in Kalin's *I hung back, held fire, danced and lied*. Fabo foregrounds the sexualized body (with personal snap shots, porn images, historical photos) and insistently positions it as part of the fabric of gay experience.

## RODNEY LEE

With the boys, AIDS has raised the stakes for gay men's bodies considerably. Safer erotic practices that we have developed in response to the pandemic are situated in bodily and social practices. AIDS affects the way we deal with our bodies in the present and the way we look back and remember lost friends and lovers: as John Greyson said in his introduction at the Scoping Boys panel, "our erotic spaces are haunted by ghosts." Loss immediately brings new significance to the presence—and absence—of erotic bodies for gay men.

#### This Text Which Is Not One: or the collective voices of Rob and Lee

Though our names might suggest otherwise, we are not the same person with a shifting alter-ego. Quite seriously, however, it does seem important to end with a few words on the collective and the individual. TPW should be applauded for their efforts in organizing the two shows and panels. The panels were instrumental in extending discussions around the politics of looking at Queer erotic images. Though, in the end we were left confused by the change of the original title from "Groping Boys" to "Scoping Boys" and what it means to scope or grope. In retrospect, this title change seemed like an attempt to achieve parity between the two panels, but the different implications of "scoping" and "groping" might have worked better to suggest the issues specific to each panel.

*Robert W.G. Lee is a Montreal-based writer and curator with a penchant for chocolates. He is curating a group exhibition opening this fall at the Saidye Bronfman Centre for the Arts, entitled "Refigured Histories/Remembered Pasts," which will include the work of Andy Fabo.*

*Lee Rodney lives in Toronto and is currently recovering from an MA thesis entitled Self Served: Early Video and the Politics of Narcissism.*

## DESPERATION DISRUPTED

### Sunnybrook: A True Story with Lies

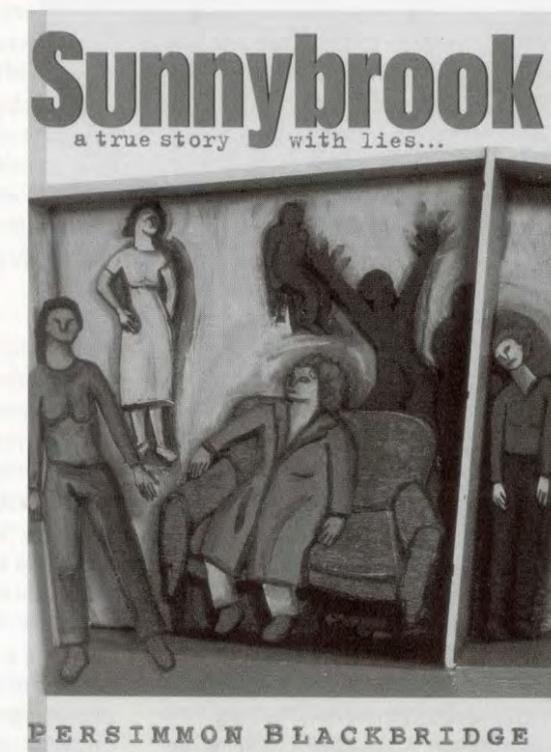
BY PERSIMMON BLACKBRIDGE  
PRESS GANG PUBLISHERS, VANCOUVER, 1996

REVIEW BY ANN DECTER

*Sunnybrook: A True Story with Lies*, a novel by sculptor and Kiss & Tell performance artist Persimmon Blackbridge, vividly inhabits the realm of psychiatric institutionalization, criss-crossing lines between resident and staff, text and image, fiction and memoir. This scrupulously designed book is a full-colour artistic gesture that mocks these distinctions, playfully delivering a very human message through both form and content.

In a faux naive tone Diane, the narrator—who describes herself as "young and white and diplomaed" and is, occasionally a.k.a. Persimmon—relates a story of faking her way into a counselling job at Sunnybrook Institute for the Mentally Handicapped in 1975, and then trying to cope with the job itself. Diane's ability to deceive her employer stems, at least in part, from her own youthful experiences as a patient in a child guidance clinic. "I know behaviour mod," she notes flatly in marginal hyper-text. Diane-the-patient becomes Diane-the-counsellor, a pretend professional uncomfortable acknowledging the line between herself and the institutionalized people she works with at Sunnybrook, as her early pleasure in the success of her

\$5-an-hour charade slips into role-confusion and frustration.



Because Diane lives a double role—a mental health worker who has been psychiatrized—she provides a vehicle to explore the conventions and contradictions of social divisions between the free and the un-free, the locked up and those of us on our own recognizance. Though Diane regularly insists to the residents that she is "not a nurse," when she

stumbles upon two residents heterosexually engaged she feels an urge to “help” Pat, the woman. Diane discusses the incident with her two lovers. The above-ground girlfriend, a nameless feminist professional, encourages Diane to report the lovers to her superiors, for various “good” reasons. Diane’s secret lover—a bar dyke Diane calls Shirley-Butch after a resident and a psych survivor herself—argues that as Diane can’t do anything to provide a safe and independent sexual existence for Pat she should keep her help to herself. At this moment Diane is clearly left in a no-woman’s land, occupying space between staff and resident, unsure how to be an ally to those with whom she empathizes. Here Blackbridge hits the nub of Diane’s political problem, one that conjured memories both of my own twenties and of left politics in the 1970s, before the clarification of appropriation issues through identity-based organizing of the 1980s. Diane’s sharply contrasted lovers heighten the power contradictions of her situation. And Shirley-Butch’s lustful anger foils Diane’s attempts to perceive herself as other than jailor, jolting Diane out of the encroaching attitudes of her work role and back into perceiving Sunnybrook’s residents as feeling, adult, human beings.

The moments when Diane uses the keys to allow a resident outside breathe with the life denied inside the institution. The naïveté of Diane’s tone quiets to simplicity as Janey the athlete runs “tearing across the lawns, laughing... jumping for the tall maple trees, bursting into the air with wild shouts” or Stuart explores a “tree, touching it carefully with fingertips, palms and face, breathing its smell, frowning in concentration.” It is in these glimpses of common humanness that the narrative text soars.

Before reading *Sunnybrook* I described it as an illustrated novel. The term is not inappropriate, but my process of reading

*Sunnybrook* was not one of reading text and checking the illustrations for images of characters and places. *Sunnybrook*’s images—almost all photographs of sculptures from the art show that spawned the novel—were immediately present, the narrative was a blending of image and text, two strands working in synch. The simultaneity brought to mind Art Speigelman’s graphic novels *Maus* where visual and textual narratives blend to narrate the details of historical oppression without melodrama. Muted colours and locked-up faces haunt the simple tone of the text. Playful, intimate textual narrative disrupts the quiet desperation of the art, chatting through solemn images of life inside the institution in an accessible exposition of injustice. Diane’s patter suffuses the visual narrative with a wistful search for another version of this reality. One where everybody gets to go home, not just the staff.

Most of the images in *Sunnybrook* are reproductions of photographs (by Kiss & Tell collective member Susan Stewart) of a sculpture show that pre-dates the text. In her acknowledgements the author thanks designer Val Speidel for translating these “sculptures and a quirky manuscript into a book that is more than a document of an art show.” And she certainly has. This book is almost as much designed as it is written. Beyond the placement and inter-weaving of the photographs, marginal “hypertext” (like Douglas Coupland, only directly relevant to the story) in a variety of fonts provides asides that explain and undercut the main textual narrative. Pert love comic images of characters, culled from a pulp novel Diane reads in a basement staff washroom to alleviate frustration, smile longingly from the pages of *Sunnybrook*. Blond Nurse Holly and the handsome, arrogant Dr. Peters insert a white pop culture escape into the bowels of the institution.

There is a slow unveiling of the personal voice throughout the text of *Sunnybrook*, a commentary that flows into the narrative largely, but not entirely, through marginal notes. Blackbridge begins this thread with the understated comment: “Lots of people can’t type, but some people really can’t type. I belong to the second variety.” And gradually, through Diane’s discussions with Shirley-Butch and other hypertext comments, the author arrives at the apparent personal revelation that years later, “I could even say the words Learning Disabled without choking.” But then she immediately peels back another layer to reveal that, “In the end, Diane only wrote the words Learning Disabled under intense pressure from her writing group. So obviously she’s still choking.” Here Blackbridge blurs that ever fuzzy distinction between fiction and memoir, real and imagined, truth and lies, teasingly tossing out the unanswered question, “Whose story is this?”

In a much-needed final scene, Blackbridge adds a second textual question, a theoretical “Who’s zoomin’ who?” that allows the story to transcend Diane’s 1975 political dilemma. She acknowledges the changes in political organizing by psychiatric consumers over the last twenty years. As a reader, I needed this political moment, not so much to escape the story of institutionalization, but to allow for the change process of the intervening years. Janey, Mary, Stuart, Shirley, Pat and her boyfriend from Ward 3, Shirley-Butch churning dust in her aged Rambler, rendered in colours that mute human existence, resonate beyond keys and locked doors, and beyond these pages. And like Persimmon Blackbridge in her continuing artistic evolution, many of them have been consumer advocates for years.

*Ann Decker is a Toronto writer and editor. Her most recent book is the novel Honour.*

## POETRY’S POSSE

### My Mother’s Last Dance

BY HONOR FORD-SMITH  
TORONTO, SISTER VISION PRESS, 1997

REVIEW BY RINALDO WALCOTT

*Lionheart Gal*, a collection of narrative tales drawing on the fictionalized life experiences of Jamaican women by Sistren (a mainly Afro-Jamaican feminist collective) and Honor Ford-Smith, is arguably one of the most important books to come out of Caribbean feminist, artistic circles in the last twenty years. Honor Ford-Smith, who compiled and edited the collection, has recently published her first book of poetry, *My Mother’s Last Dance*. Ford-Smith, a performer, writer and academic, draws on all her various and varied talents and knowledges to narrate these lyrical tales of history and memory. The poems are accomplished for the way in which Ford-Smith articulates Caribbean-ness in all its complexities. The poems reveal Ford-Smith’s engagements with not only the performing arts, but with critical discourses concerning whiteness, memory, history, language, orality, the scribal tradition and a mélange of different elements, producing a cadence that is a remarkable product of that creolized archipelago of sorrow and pleasure, the Caribbean.

In particular, the stale and trite invocation of the orality of Caribbean poetic works can be put on sabbatical. Honor Ford-Smith’s *My Mother’s Last Dance* is a narrative poem that owes as much to the scribal tradition as it does to the oral one, if not more. The language of this poem exceeds any attempt to erect easy identity boundaries, instead constantly pushing us to engage with perspectives that the language conjures up and calls our attention to. Ford-Smith must be read in the context of a Caribbean poetic posse,

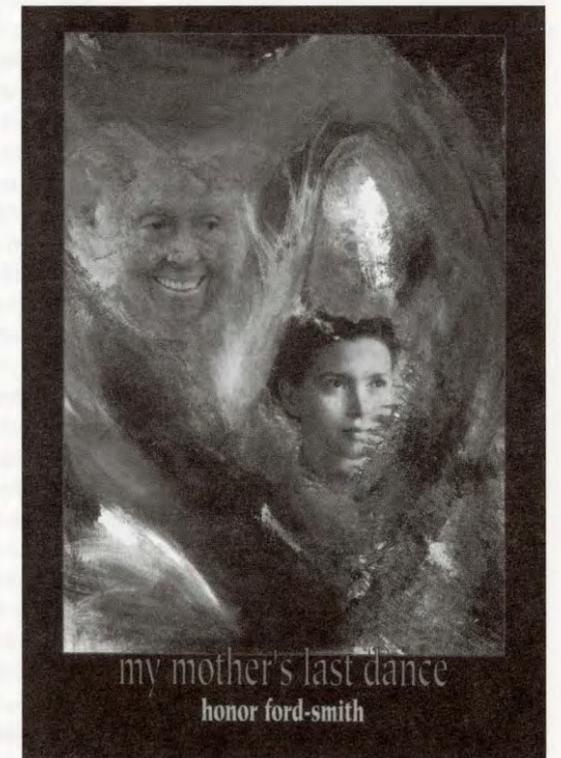
including such veterans of the scribal tradition as Derek Walcott, Kamau Brathwaite, Olive Senior, Pamela Mordecai, Grace Nichols, Fred D’Aguir and those of the oral tradition including Mutabaruka, Michael Smith, Lillian Allen, Jean ‘Binta’ Breeze and the innovator of it all, Louise Bennett. The traces are all evident in *My Mother’s Last Dance*.

This Caribbean poetic posse draws on the various resources of a post-independent, post-colonial era where the commiseration of poverty demands another and another rupture for freedom. Ford-Smith titles the first half of the collection “History’s Posse”; a number of poems speak directly to the enduring link between colonial and post-colonial positions. The poems in “History’s Posse” use language to take readers across the race, colour, class and gendered lines of Jamaican society. In the poem “Aunt May at Carron Hall Orphanage” (for May Grant) the evidence is laid out for us:

her stiff fair-skinned Aunt, afraid to say  
“this child is my sister’s”  
to the white missionaries  
lest they find her black too  
and turn her from benefactress  
to object of their sanctifying mission

The poem embodies the contradictions and frailties of colonial society. The poem portrays May Grant as an experiment of the missionary project in Jamaica. Ford-Smith brings us to the brink of Grant’s reversal and rejection of a colonial consciousness. Grant becomes “a black flower white with rage.” The poems are not sentimental in tone.

Similarly, in “A Message from Ni” Ford-Smith troubles and worries the super-heroic fantasy of Ni or Nanny. Ni says of narratives concerning her, “I never recog-



nize that woman they describe" and she proceeds to let us know how it really was. The poem is an attempt to struggle with "the strong black women" label that often does not account for black women's pain and emotional well being in their struggles. Ni "vomited after seeing the dead" and "the smell of blood/made [her] faint." Ford-Smith humanizes Ni, in terms of her inability to be otherwise in the face of oppression. Ni is heroic, not because of her actions, but because "it was terror of terror that drove [her] on" and made her act.

The section "History's Posse" takes its title from the central poem; it is rather surreal in Western terms, but in the Caribbean frame of reference, some combination of myalism or obeah might be more accurate terms. ("But they only scratched my throat with the ratchet blade./Blood dulled the knife's silver-edged glint.") "History's Posse" is the personification of History and the terror that it has wreaked on the landscape of Jamaica and, by extension, the Caribbean. History's remnants now constitute the archipelago of poverty and sorrow that the Caribbean is. But History is also the site of pleasure, life and resistance which makes Caribbean peoples lives livable. The protagonist in the poem takes on History:

Well I did. Unzipped, I rose up flapping,  
high and cool as a kite. But I had no form.  
Unnamed, nameless, invisible, I floated  
over the landscape of burnt cane, over the  
all-inclusives and their swimming pools,  
over the markets and stalls of jerk  
chicken. I looked down on everything.  
I was hungry but I couldn't eat. I was tired  
but I couldn't sleep. I was vulgar abstract.  
No context at all. It was like being  
trapped in a dream. "History," I thought,  
"you win this first round."

"History's Posse" is a poem of resistance in the face of overwhelming odds. It skill-

fully narrates the relation between colonial, post-colonial and neo-colonial practices and the changing face of oppression. However, in the final analysis, despite valiant responses, we just cannot escape History; there is no outside from it.

In *My Mother's Last Dance*, Ford-Smith's important accomplishment is to bring together the Caribbean landscape, language and the metaphors necessary for making sense of the place. Edward Kamau Brathwaite in *A History of the Voice* long argued that one of the challenges for Caribbean poets was to express the landscape and environment in language that both derived from and fit the place. Brathwaite along with Derek Walcott and many others (some mentioned above) pioneered a rewriting of the poetic pentameter; Ford-Smith carries on that tradition by breaking out of the pentameter and constructing a Creole narrative poem. While dependent upon voice and sounds/song, the poem is not only oral, it is also written. The need for both is what makes the poem Creole. If I might appropriate a fragment of a phrase from the poem to describe the collection I would say that the poem exists at "the curve of a white darkness."

Let me now to turn to what might be the central metaphor of the poem—family. Family in Ford-Smith's collection bares its traces to questions of nation. Yet, it must be made clear that the collection is not a jingoistic celebration of family and nation. Rather, *My Mother's Last Dance* is about death and dying in a family. From a father's suicide to a mother's death from cancer, Death lingers everywhere in the poems, even arriving in "a big old Benz." But these familial deaths also work as metaphors for contemporary Jamaica. The gangs and death squads of poverty are on the one hand collectively suicidal and the neo-colonial posturing and policy-making of the wealthy represent the cancer of his-

tory continually devouring the nation. In poems like "Transfusion 1989" those echoes are evident.

*My Mother's Last Dance* is the title of the second section, and the collection. Death and dying becomes the ground upon which all silences are broken by the poet. In fact, "History's Posse" and "My Mother's Last Dance" leak into each other to compose a sustained narrative. Descriptions of the poet's mother are not very different from those of May Grant. Making sense of the poet's grandfather ("Cartography of a Life: Grandpa Son at Rockhall") from section one allows for clearer understanding of the poet's political awareness ("Separation Poems" and "Dinner at the Apartment in Toronto") and its impact on familial relations. Family and nation in Ford-Smith's work are not blankets of security but rather they are the very things that one needs to question, to make tensions evident and to unravel at the seams any falseness.

Each poem moves between the thin lines of familial discord to national discord and back. If nations are families and families are nations, Ford-Smith uncovers and reveals the "public secrets" that make nations and families troubling, oppressive and in desperate need of repair. Honor Ford-Smith's *My Mother's Last Dance* gives an unflinching look into the colour, class, gendered politics of colonial and post-independent Jamaican society. Her eye in this exploration is much keener than Michelle Cliff's attempt at a similar exercise. Ford-Smith lays bare and clear the troubles and worries of the isle of sorrow, never leaving us feeling helpless and alone. I can't wait until her eyes, ears and words are unleashed on assessments of the Canadian landscape.

Rinaldo Walcott is a professor at York University and the author of the forthcoming *Black Like Who?*

## STUDIOLO

### The Mutable Space of Martha Fleming and Lyne Lapointe

STUDIOLO: THE COLLABORATIVE WORK OF MARTHA FLEMING & LYNE LAPOINTE  
BY MARTHA FLEMING, WITH LYNE LAPOINTE AND LESLEY JOHNSTONE  
MONTREAL, ARTEXTE EDITIONS, 1997  
DISTRIBUTED IN CANADA BY ARTEXTE DISTRIBUTION

REVIEW BY CAMILLA GRIGGERS AND NELL TENHAAF

They abandoned each other, themselves, their art to the zones of the discarded and disused. They refused the boundary of the studio at the very beginning of their relationship, and have never gone back. What did they have to lose? Lapointe was recovering from a nervous breakdown when she met Fleming; Fleming longed for a life beyond her typewriter. Together they longed for more meaning, and so they went to work, combing abandoned neighborhoods for the right building, shoveling out debris, hand cleaning floors with lye mixtures, fighting the city for rights of entry—all for a series of installations that no longer exist...

In North America an ethos of opportunity rules. It is tied to mobility, a frontier mentality and firm adherence to the idea of progress. It is not uncommon for artists to overturn this ethos and seek out economically troubled locations, most often for reasons of survival, but also in recognition of the latent power in marginality. During their more than decade-long collaboration, Martha Fleming and Lyne Lapointe carried this strategy to a kind of apotheosis through inhabiting and revivifying discarded urban spaces for limited-term site installations. They offered a compelling counter-force to the usual cycle of artists' occupancy followed by gentrification evident even in the generally depressed economy of Montreal. The power of their work lay in the invitation to an audience to physically enter into grand architectural spaces and then consider a refusal of grand narratives tied to the idea of progress.

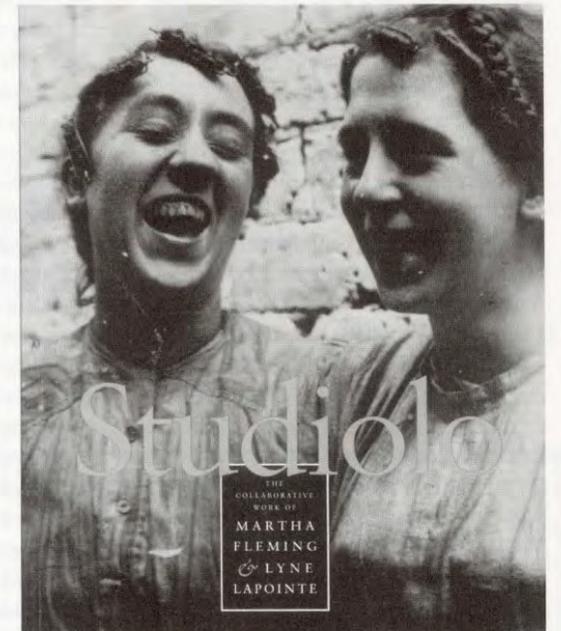
There is a confusion between "I" and "We" here, a confusion between personal experience and public memory, between the artists and their sites. A mutability that bleeds into everything, into the walls, the shadows, onto the lye-bathed floors, across the stage of abandoned theatres, into one's vision. Before the tyranny of the schoolhouse, before the letter of the law, there is the memory of light and shadow, of fluid spaces, the intuitive movement toward the body of the beloved. Everything looks differently from here.

*Everything...*

The lucid and richly textured document that is *Studiolo* tracks such an overturning of values within a web of other inversions. Any summary would tend to reduce the complexity of this story of the Lapointe/Fleming collaboration, recounted here principally through the production of four major installations between 1982 and 1990. Filled with site photos, source materials and other visual references, the first half of the book is a "lyrical docu-fiction" by Fleming, and the second half focuses on conversations between Fleming, Lapointe and Lesley Johnstone, Montreal critic, curator and longtime supporter of the artists. But to the authors' collective credit, one gleans the book's major themes even while totally absorbed in the non-linear unfold-

ing of their life and work together. One of these themes is the audacity of mapping a different understanding of opportunity onto the decaying face of a city, not from some sense of nostalgia, as the authors overtly state, but from a desire to create spaces of possibility and of community. These are described in political terms, as sexualized spaces of memory, enunciation and taboo-breaking, feminine sites of resistance and empowerment.

Parallel themes of textuality and materiality merge in a symbiosis as powerful as the artists' compelling tale of love. In documents from their first projects together, Fleming is invisible in the public face of the collaboration. The press releases



reproduced in the book, for both *Projet Building/Caserne #14* (1982) and *Le Musée des Sciences* (1984), credit the works to Lapointe although Fleming and Monique Jean are named as collaborators on the latter. This prolonged moment of deference, in the early stages of their coming together, evokes respect to Lapointe's already established ability to shape materials and draw from their symbolic import.

The elaborate installations they created were composed of a range of materials from the most raw natural item to intricate viewing devices. As the art world was then just entering its extended theory-driven phase, perhaps this emphasis on materiality signalled a defiance of text as the ultimate interpretive medium. The dense intertextual experience of moving through the installations is repeated as much as is possible in the format of *Studiolo*. The book sheds light on the incredible physical and organizational demands involved in forming the projects, on the nature of the working relationship between Fleming and Lapointe, and on the representational issues that preoccupied and linked these two sensibilities. Layers of political, historical, psychological, social, sexual, scientific and cultural implication emerge in the reading, but the book never seems to designate the last word on either intentionality or meaning.

From the moment of their first meeting in 1981, they shared an intuitive attraction across barriers of culture, language and sexual taboo. Out of that attraction came a series of large scale, site-specific installations. A necessary strategy perhaps, for those whose own invisible public identity must be commemorated on the walls of abandoned buildings, where the disinvestment of capital allows for public expressions by unrecognized publics, without the threat of immediate censure and punishment. The project that drove them was never small in scope. It grew, this mutable and persistent thing

between them, from the slant of light across the bedroom floor of the beloved (*bride to bride*), to the political critique of Western perspective and its relation to the architecture of modern public space—the architecture of nationalist histories and identities. An immense project, let's be honest. But the immensity of it all only proliferated their desires, their art projects, and their public. In retrospect, they can only say of what they did together over all those years—*"We only know that we are thankful to have been naive, and to have been in love."*

Against the official histories and representations of the State, the artists stand their works in the corner, drawn on the floor in the basement, in the remains of what has been left behind, discarded artifacts placed in emptied rooms—fragile and ephemeral spaces in which the spectator/reader is invited to move intuitively, as one moves intuitively toward light in a corridor of shadows, or toward the body of the beloved. In this sensual world one is left to search, to find one's way among the debris of modernization and the after-effects of progress, seeking an intimacy that would realize "both subjectivity and solidarity"—the germ of possibility for a communal identity, forged in public places that have been abandoned, and in an erotic spectacle of public abandon between two women in love.

If they are as well, in the middle of all this, privileged artists acting out their own personal desires in public, their saving gesture is in the conceptualization and construction of their site projects as memory theatres. These sites are not mausoleums of the artists' own private memories, but rather places where people can go to remember—remember not only their own private sensory experiences before the law of disciplined public vision, but to remember their shared communal history as subjects of nationalist mercantile expansion who ended up on the side of the aban-

doned, the displaced, the invisible. Consider the elderly pair of women who brought their popcorn to the abandoned vaudeville theatre to see the performance of their own memories played against the staging of Lapointe's and Fleming's homoerotic compulsion to rearticulate public space as the body of the beloved.

Clearly the audience to which Lapointe and Fleming speak is first and foremost a lesbian one, and this is key to the affirmative way in which they map their resistance to the entrenched symbolic order, the patriarchal order. They write their own marginalized personal and collective desire onto their chosen sites and into history. But paradoxically, the spatialized way in which they write to the viewing subject is marked by both homoerotic specificity and multiplicity. They propose an unstable subject in this sense, a proposition that is full of possibility and inclusiveness. Yes, the first order of address is lesbian, making *Studiolo* a virtual manifesto of naming and re-territorializing. But Lapointe's and Fleming's invitation to explore human knowledge and exult in pleasure outside the law is extended to all, to anyone who is willing to enter and engage with it.

*Nell Tenhaaf is a Montreal-based artist and writer whose visual and textual work develops a feminist perspective on the cultural implications of new technologies. She has recently joined the faculty of the Department of Visual Arts at York University. Her work is represented in Montreal by Galerie Samuel Lallouz.*

*Camilla Griggers is Distinguished Chair of Women's Studies at Carlow College in Pittsburgh. She is the author of Becoming-Woman (University of Minnesota Press, 1997). She is the director and producer of several videos, including Alienations of the Mother Tongue (1995), The Micropolitics of Biopsychiatry (1996), and Memories of a Forgotten War (in progress). She is the founding editor of the e-journal Cultronix.*

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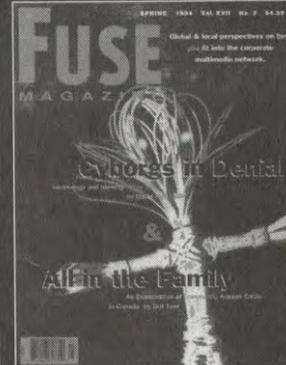


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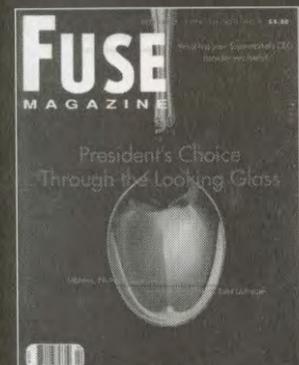
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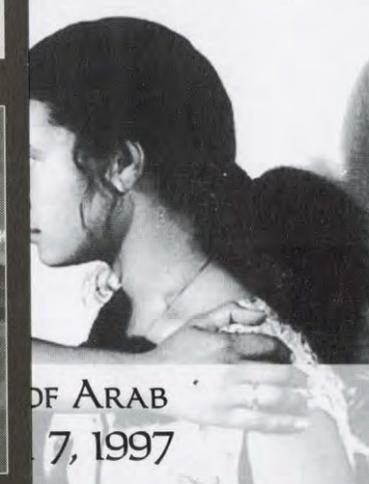
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### SOO-JA KIM

A Laundry Field - Sewing into Looking  
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Opening: Friday, September 5, 7 - 8 p.m.

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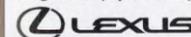
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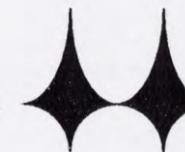
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Willie Doherty

