

Volume 19 Number 4 \$5.50 A magazine about issues of art and culture

FUSE

MAGAZINE

Native Love

by Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew

OH!

Rinaldo Walcott on "The OH! Canada Project"

Art for a Nation? by Lynda Jessup

Richard Fung on Convergence 1996

plus reviews of
J.J. Lee
Cathy Sisler
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"Straight Up"
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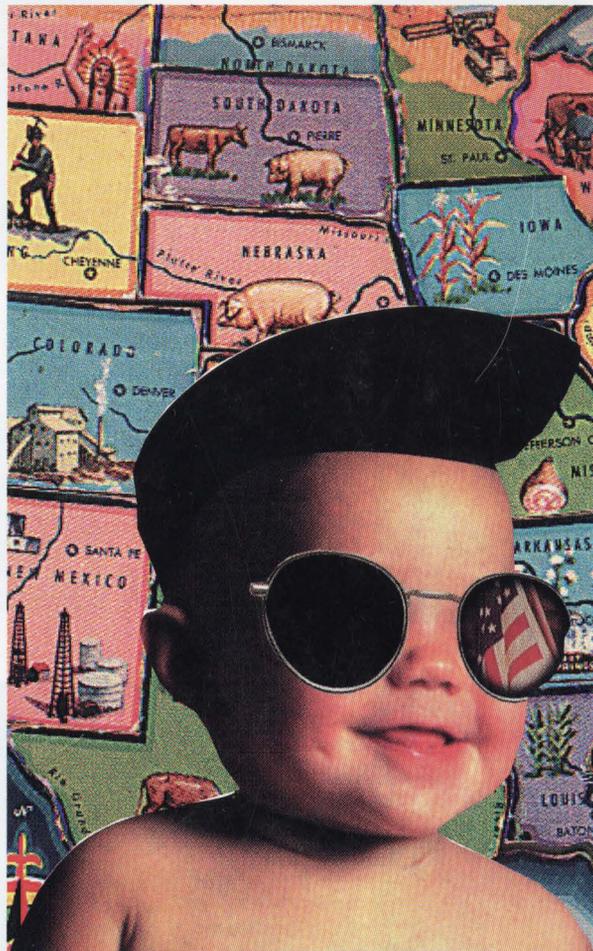
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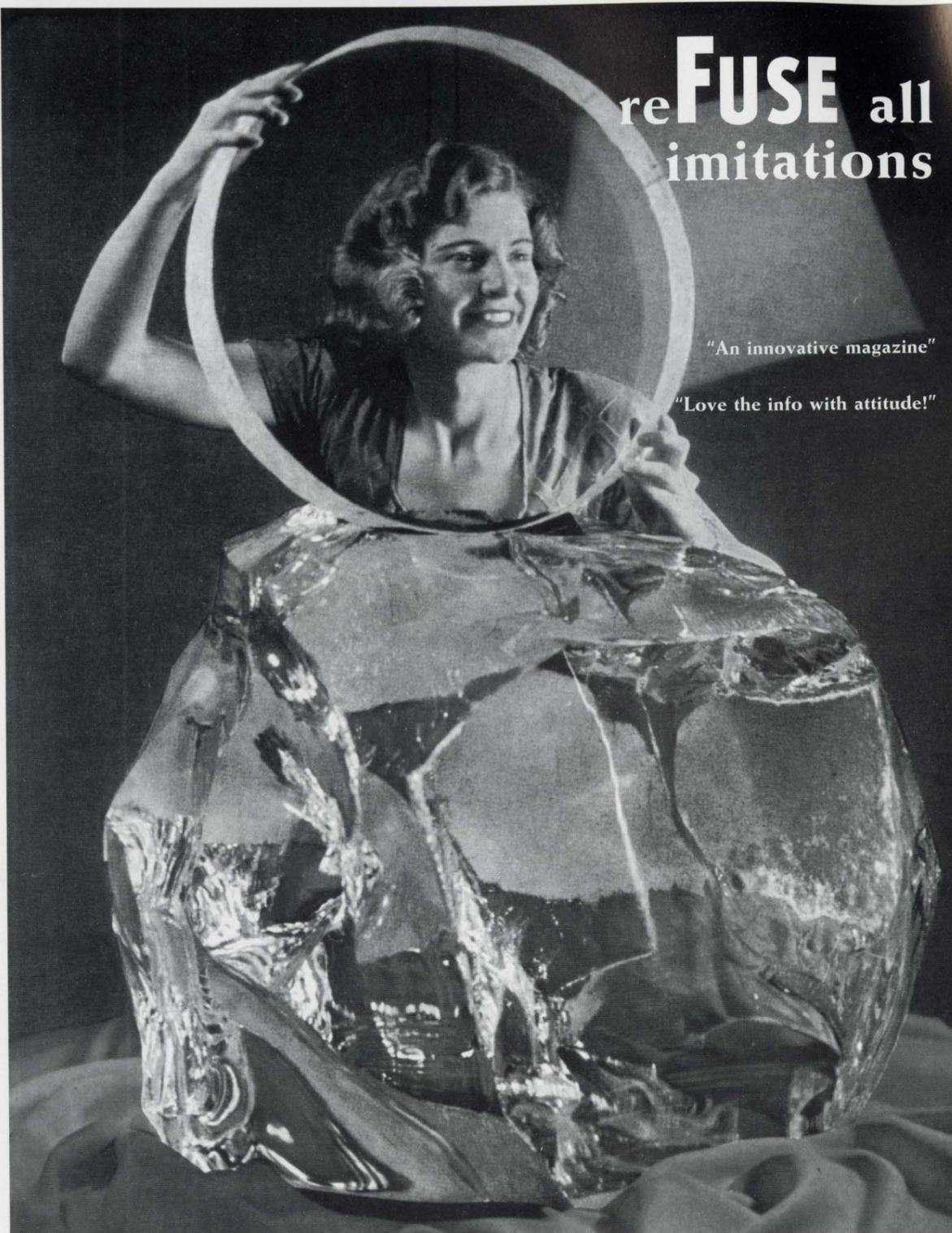
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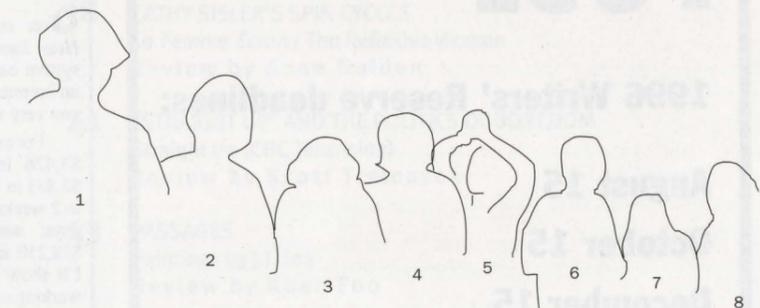
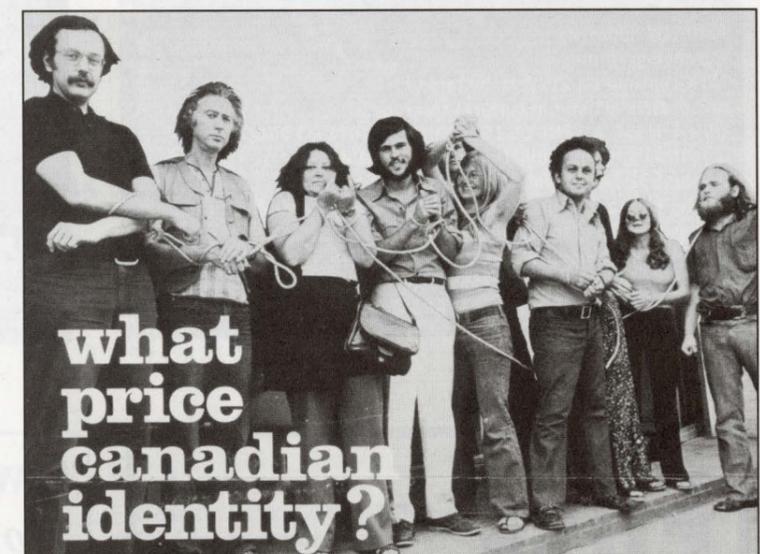
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EDITORIAL

Canada. Difference. Canadas. Since the 1980s, the cultural politics of difference and representation have been the stated or unstated subject of much museum, art gallery, film, video and television activity. This issue of FUSE scrutinizes a range of recent curatorial representations of difference while attempting to articulate a political project that moves beyond garbled national talk of unifying sameness to address the fictions and frictions of the many Canadas we live in. FUSE looks into the souls of a range of interconnected Canadas to sort through the question "Who do you think you are?!"

Lynda Jessup and Rinaldo Walcott interrogate what is at stake in the curatorial management of difference in the national tales constructed by "Art for a Nation" and "The OH! Canada Project," respectively. Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew proposes the artist-organized "Native Love" exhibit as a site for rethinking our relationship to difference and to ways of knowing, as well as a project where love assumes more expansive meanings than as a cute fluffy emotion or as a subject of psychotherapeutic investigation. Extending the realm of investigation of the cultural politics of difference, Robin Curtiss examines the presentation of Chinese "Kanadian" film at the Berlin Film Festival to discover that local multicultural discourse does not translate easily abroad. In a similar vein, Kuan Foo's review of J.J. Lee's exhibition of paintings in Vancouver, Richard Fung's travel report on the Convergence conference in India and Anne Golden's study of Cathy Sisler's multi-media exhibit in Montreal all reflect the desire and need for critical and ethical engagements with difference. Rounding out this issue are Scott Treleaven's reading of the CBC series "Straight Up" to rebut its fossilized representation of Black and white working class youth culture, while Judith Doyle's review of "The American Trip" deconstructs the process by which curation can externalize difference in order to subordinate and exoticize it.

All of the columns, features and reviews intervene in the continuing conversation concerning the politics of representation, the attempted appropriation of subversive practices by state institutions and the conditions in which subversive practices can continue to emerge outside of the conventional curatorial gaze. This issue of FUSE attempts to pinpoint consequences of a variety of curatorial practices as they relate to the structures of nation and to the manner in which difference is exhibited and inhabited.

Errata

The names of three artists were incorrectly spelled in the review entitled "From Memory to Transformation," FUSE vol. 19, no. 3. The correct spellings should be: Irene Frolic, Sylvia Safdie, Ruth Libermann.



Convergence 1996

THE AESTHETIC, POLITICAL AND ETHICAL ISSUES IN CROSS-CULTURAL ART

MYSORE, INDIA

by Richard Fung

It was billed as Convergence 1996; divergence would have been more apt. What was slated as a tri-national conversation on "The Aesthetic, Political and Ethical Issues in Cross-cultural Art," featuring postcolonial superstars Gayatri Spivak and Trinh T. Minh-ha, ended up fractious and frustrating, and divaless. But still, this February about twenty Canadian artists, academics and curators joined colleagues from India and the United States (and a single Australian participant) for five intense days in Mysore, India. And for all its deficiencies, it would be unfair and untrue to describe this gathering as a waste of time. As a seasoned conference queen, I've long ago decided that what makes or breaks it at such events is only partly a matter of the formal sessions; it's equally about the more intimate conversations that take place at coffee breaks and dinners, and it's about who's there. At Convergence 1996, there were some great minds and great art (in video and slides), and for me the conference presented a rare opportunity to interact with artists and critics in another part of the globe. In both its successes and its failures, Convergence 1996 offered a chance to experience, ponder and learn from the problems, possibilities and assumptions of transnational interactions.

Organized by the Centre for Cultures, Technologies and the Environment (CCTE), Convergence 1996 was really a kind of family effort: the conference organizers Chandrabhanu Pattanayak (vice-president) and Vibha Sharma (secretary) are also life partners who divide their time between Montreal and Mysore, where the CCTE offices are housed in the Pattanayak homes; the conference proceedings took place at the Southern Regional Language Centre Auditorium, apparently garnered through connections from Dr. D.P. Pattanayak, Chandrabhanu's father and a

noted linguist; the three Pattanayaks programmed the Indian and Canadian elements of the conference and chaired all of the meetings, with the addition of Idaho State University professor Paul Tate who, apparently responding to a listing on the Internet, organized the American contingent. (Here again a family theme was evident as several of the U.S. presenters were married to each other.) Such a visible concentration of power and responsibility meant that the Pattanayaks shouldered most of the work, and all of the blame whenever things went wrong.

And there was a lot to criticize. From the initial material the CCTE and Convergence 1996 appeared well-organized, well-connected and full of resources. The outline of events promised keynotes, "white papers," art presentations, discussions, studio space and other facilities for collaborations among participating artists. Selected papers from the conference were to be published in an Indian and a North American journal. As February approached I became increasingly worried that I still didn't know what context I was to speak in: lecture, workshop, panel? If so, who were the other presenters? I began to suspect that the organizers had bitten off more than they could chew. I then began to hear grumbling among Canadian artists about vagueness of premise, poor communication and a sloppily handled selection process: funds were found for some artists, others were told that they should make their own way—artists' gossip. (I had applied for and received a travel grant.)

For my part, I was troubled by the way the topic of the conference was framed. I am leery of the term cross-cultural as it flattens relations of power and can therefore be used to depoliticizing effect, as when "cross-cultural communication" replaces discussion of

racism. At the same time, I recognize that there are no single satisfactory terms to accommodate the variety of issues that the organizers hoped to address. More specifically, however, I was disturbed by the "Proposal Background" in the introductory package, which began with the statement, "Several years ago, the Canada Council (the Canadian Government's granting agency for the arts) recommended to its juries that the issue of 'voice appropriation' be considered in decisions about funding for artists." Not only was I suspicious of the image of "political correctness" gone wild in our institutions, the statement just isn't true. Neither the Canada Council nor to my knowledge any other funding body in Canada has adopted policy proscriptions against "cultural" or "voice appropriation." I expressed this concern when first contacted in September 1995, but the statement was never deleted from the advertising material. After I took issue with this misrepresentation during my talk at Convergence 1996, Paul Tate explained that he wrote the statement based on information from press clippings on the Internet. Apparently we're still confronting the fall out from *The Globe and Mail's* sensationalist (mis)treatment of the recommendations from the council's Racial Equality Committee.¹

Ironically, the conference restaged the conditions that launched the critique of cultural appropriation in the first place. There was no aboriginal speaker from any of the three countries (in India, "tribal" issues are as crucial to the national question as First Nations ones are in North America). Even if scheduled speaker Concordia University professor Gail Guthrie Valaskakis did not have to cancel, as the only aboriginal participant she might have found herself bearing an awkward "burden of representation." This situation was especially unfortunate since, in North America at any rate, native people have been the greatest advocates of this critique.

Several Indian participants complained of a conservative bent (both political and aesthetic) in the programming, and the Indian contingent did include a number of institutional egos. But despite the notable absences, there were still some very strong presentations at Convergence 1996. Standouts for me included Delhi-based Amit Mukhopadhyaya's politically sophisticated lecture on artist Somnath Hore, Minneapolis psychologist Nancy Kobrin's convergent analysis of postcolonial and traumatic stress in poster art, Concordia University professor Tom Waugh's look

at Indian activist documentary and Vibha Sharma's own paper on the intricate economics and politics behind, and the social and cultural impact of, satellite television in India. In addition, most of the artist presentations were of very high quality, and I was especially excited to be introduced to the work of Indian artists such as Delhi-based, Canadian-exhibited Vivan Sundaram and a group of younger, regionally based installation artists who showed slides from an exhibition mounted in response to communal violence in nearby Bangalore, the latter thanks to artist Ayisha Abraham (recently of New York, now resettled in India), who gave up part of her allotted time to accommodate them.

Due at least in part to late proposals and the loss of a second room, the schedule was only finalized the night before the conference and the programme ended up haphazard and crammed (only to be exacerbated by daily power cuts). The continuous sequence of single presentations, which lasted from 9:30 AM to late in the evening, revealed no logical order. And with no time allotted to sightsee, shop or relax, participants took off on their own and in groups, and at any single time a goodly proportion was absent. I, for instance, sneaked out with some of the Indian and Canadian artists to visit the local art college and an excellent folklore museum on the university campus.

Although there was time for questions and comments after each paper, cross-dialogue was not encouraged, and no round tables, panels, plenary discussions or feedback sessions were planned. This burden was carried almost single-handedly by Vancouver artist Chris Creighton-Kelly's performance "The Power is Back On," and his very thoughtful and to the point follow-up session. But that couldn't suffice and finally, fueled by the frustrations of a number of participants (myself included), Montreal artist Su Schnee intervened, and a closing plenary and evaluation session was organized and co-facilitated by Canada Council video officer Yasmin Karim and Hyderabad art critic Rasna Bhushan.

At large gatherings people tend to fall into circles of common interest, politics, discipline, and at transnational events, nationality. Significantly, at Convergence 1996 nationality seemed to facilitate not only circles of affinity, but also the most virulent axes of disagreement. Although Vivan Sundaram opened his artist talk by wondering whether questions had been posed in too much of a "North American framework," most criticism by attending Indians was saved for other Indians—even Sundaram's remarks were more a jab at the organizers than an affront to the visitors—and the most stringent critique of North American speakers came from other North Americans (or by Canadians of Americans, to be more precise). It

was almost as if Sherry Simon's early Spivak-inspired lecture about the problems of translation put a jinx on the conference.

But we were all speaking English, which in any case is the intellectual lingua franca of India. This wasn't a problem of language but of context. It seems to me that for equitable transnational conversation to succeed, it requires self-consciously foregrounding and negotiating the terms of discussion, which in turn demands that one acknowledge the limitations of one's own discourse. For instance, in their own contexts a (non-Indian) Canadian artist working with "Indian" traditions faces a different set of issues from an Indian artist working with "European" ones (and I'm using these categories only for ease of argument; I'm not assuming that these are discrete or self-contained traditions). While the first may be accused of cultural appropriation, the second may be seen as giving in to cultural imperialism, as aping the West, or more likely, they may not be seen to be working "cross-culturally" at all, but simply as "modern" artists, for example. Indian diasporic artists, on the other hand, may find themselves particularly subject to interrogations about "authenticity," whatever the cultural inflection of their practice.

Unfortunately, the written material for Convergence 1996 framed "cross-cultural art" mainly within a North American perspective. Americans and Canadians, despite our differences, share similar vocabularies and debates, hence our ability to converse easily, even in disagreement. Unfortunately, little attention was paid to the ways this issue manifests itself in an Indian context: what might "cross-cultural" mean in India, a country of many languages, cultures, and religions; is it considered to have any urgency or relevance; what are the circulating discourses and politics surrounding "tribal" images; how does "communalism" (notably Hindu-Muslim tensions) translate into the politics of art production? While we were meeting, a furor was heating up as officials of Karnataka state (in which Mysore and Bangalore are located) considered mandatory delays in the release of Hindi films as a means of promoting the local Kannada language cinema. This debate didn't make it into the formal sessions.

The contextual bias was aggravated by the fact that, with few exceptions, the academic and theoretical lectures by North Americans tended to be *about* India but not addressed *to* Indians; they assumed a universal



Alexander the Great with his Persian wife Roxana, accompanied by the Brahmins; from an Indian miniature of the seventeenth century.

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intellectual subject position. Similarly, I suspect that the subtleties and resonances of most of the Indian academic presentations were available only to those North Americans already familiar with India either through study or diasporic connections. Such is the result of an uneven flow of information.

On the other hand, the artist talks with slides or film, perhaps because of their essentially explicative nature or because of the openness of the visual image, seemed to sidestep this problem and appeared to me to elicit the most transnationally convergent conversations (Jim-Me Yoon, Jamelie Hassan and Sue Perry especially moved dialogue forward). This was so even when they sparked controversy and disagreement, as did California artist Richard Turner's, in which an appropriated Krishna image overlaid with the letters "LSD" ignited a heated debate. Turner, who meant his piece as a critique of American cultural arrogance, seemed surprised that his work should cause offense. In defense he stated that it wasn't made for Indians but as an intervention for Americans. Toronto-based filmmaker Srinivas Krishna correctly pointed out that there is a large Hindu community in California. But as usual, there wasn't time for a deeper exploration of the strategic use of possibly offensive religious imagery: what of Salman Rushdie, Andres Serrano or Krishna himself? Having just finished a videotape that raises the question of sex among Chinese bachelor workers of the nineteenth century, the hero ancestors of the community, I was particularly interested in this question. As artists seen to be working "inside" communities, how might we avoid reinscribing the very aspects we may be attempting to critique; can we guarantee that we only offend the intended targets and in the intended way; how do we ensure that our work isn't silenced by a repressive regime of "positive images?"

Convergence 1996 took place on the heels of Jean Chrétien's lucrative (and cynical) trade mission to India and other Asian countries. As capitalism becomes increasingly global and mobile, it is ever more urgent that transnational lines of communication are opened up and maintained between artists, intellectuals, trade unionists and other progressive activists. Convergence 1996 may have felt clumsy and costly (such resources couldn't be gathered every day). As an early effort it was nevertheless a very meaningful attempt at forging an alternative global communication.

Richard Fung's latest video is Dirty Laundry. Thanks to Yasmin Karim for comments on this piece.

Note

1. For more on this issue and my involvement with it, see Richard Fung, "Working through Cultural Appropriation," *FUSE Magazine*, Summer 1993, vol. 16, no. 5/6, pp. 16-24.

Art for a Nation?

by Lynda Jessup

It is often said that history is written by those in power, that the past belongs to the winners. The National Gallery of Canada's current Group of Seven exhibition is a good example. Produced in one of Canada's most authoritative cultural institutions—in the eyes of the public, its premier gallery—"The Group of Seven: Art for a Nation," was launched unabashedly in 1995 as a celebration, a major exhibition marking the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Group of Seven's first show in May 1920. Intended to tour triumphantly through 1996, it has been booked at the Art Gallery of Ontario (where it appeared until May 5 as part of the larger "OH! Canada Project"), by the Vancouver Art Gallery (where it is currently showing until September 2), and at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, where it opens in November.

"Art for a Nation" comprises almost 180 works, not all but most by Group members. These have been arranged in six galleries, five devoted to selected paintings from the 1920 show and from the seven subsequent "flagship" exhibitions at the Art Gallery of Toronto, in which the members showed together as the Group along with their invited guests (one room each for the 1920 and 1921 shows, followed by three rooms combining those of 1922 and 1925, 1926 and 1928, and 1930 and 1931). The remaining gallery is devoted to pieces by what are described as "Academicians," selected members of the Royal Canadian Academy whose works are serving double duty in the exhibition as representative of the "academic," a term defined in the late nineteenth century to characterize the position of such institutions as the French Academy and the Royal Academy in London in relation to what were then being advanced as new ideas in art. Now synonymous with conservatism, conventionalism, dullness and prejudice, the academic is used to give shape to the central thesis of the show: that the Group of Seven was an avant-garde who succeeded in the face of hostile critical reception, who championed innovation and originality in art and, in doing so, challenged established conventions of taste

and the authority of the official art institutions through which taste itself was defined.

I am not saying that this thesis is clearly stated as such in the exhibition or in the catalogue. Nor is it argued in either context from the historical distance created by seventy-five years of hindsight and the wealth of critical studies of the avant-garde that have been published in the last thirty years or so. If that were the case, then there would be some resonance of Renato Poggioli's 1962 observation that avant-garde art is a historical concept. Recognizing it as "a phenomenon belonging to the history of art," he pointed out, "...means treating it not so much as an aesthetic fact as a sociological one." Instead, the exhibition is resolutely presentist, historical analysis having been eschewed in favour of a moralizing tone that clearly distinguishes good guys and bad. Here it is, more than half a century after the Group trounced their opponents, and we are still being asked on the one hand to react indignantly to what is presented as the "virulent attack" of the conservatives, who valued "tradition over innovation and technique over content," and on the other to root for the apparent underdogs who, armed with "new material" and "new methods," we already know will win the day.

A staggering amount of wall text has been generated for just this purpose. It includes a substantial introductory panel, wall texts in every gallery, short quotations (or what curator Charles Hill refers to as "maxims") in enlarged vinyl letters on the walls above the works, and a whopping 109 extended labels beneath. Significant portions of the introduction and panels, and all the extended labels, consist of quotations from contemporary writings, whether newspaper or journal articles, public addresses or private letters, all of them intended to illustrate that, although the Group members were supported by articulate writers, "all the way along they were confronted by vociferous opposition." The sheer volume of quotations unmediated by analysis or comment also suggests the curator felt this material "speaks for itself" in an objective presentation of historical reality. One of the chief problems with this notion, of course, is that historical material never speaks for itself; the curator always directs the course of the conversation through selection and arrangement.

In this case, he has so privileged the cacophony of contemporary opinions about the Group that what

have since come to appear as central contradictions in the Group's rhetoric have become, through uncritical repetition, central contradictions in the exhibition. We are told in the introductory panel, for instance, that "they fought against a colonialist, academic mentality that slavishly accepted standards defined by the past and by the cultures of Britain and Europe and denigrated all Canadian creative ventures." Yet, in the panel accompanying a selection of works from the Group's 1921 exhibition in Toronto, it becomes apparent that meeting such "foreign" standards was regarded by the members as a validating exercise, one the gallery clearly feels is worth repeating today. This explains why the curator has stepped outside the defined parameters of the current exhibition to include a work that was not exhibited in the Group's Toronto shows, Lawren Harris's *A Side Street*. It was purchased from the Group's "U.S. Tour 1920-21" by the Detroit Institute of Arts, the panel tells us, making it a precursor to the 1924 purchase of A.Y. Jackson's *Entrance to Halifax Harbour* by London's Tate Gallery. "Foreign recognition," the panel explains, "would continue to be important in the Group's campaign to win support from Canadians and confirm that our artists had something unique to contribute to the world." As though to deepen the irony, the Tate purchase, which is also included in the show, is touted in the next panel as confirmation of the Group of Seven's greatest critical success: "the almost unanimous" praise accorded by the British press to the artists' work in the Canadian art section of the 1924-25 British Empire Exhibition at Wembley.

And here is another irony: the response of the British press was, and is now again being celebrated by the National Gallery as vindication of its constant support of this avant-garde for more than a decade prior to the Wembley show. At the time, the most public evidence that this was the Gallery's perception of Wembley events was its publication of, not one, but two books containing reprints of the favourable reviews. In the current show, the fact that the National Gallery is still celebrating its own contribution to the Group's success is evident in the way in which the Gallery's support is profiled while that of other patrons is not. In fact, aside from the two art institutions mentioned above, the only purchaser of the artists' works identified by name in the exhibition panels is the National Gallery of Canada, which is presented, along with the unnamed, as having bought regularly from the

Toronto shows. Of course, this representation of information has other effects as well, not least of which is the way the self-congratulatory credit given the National Gallery for its staunch support of the artists runs counter to the central idea of the Group as a beleaguered avant-garde. In other words, it is difficult to sustain the central argument that the Group struggled in the face of real opposition, when the National Gallery's current desire to celebrate itself as champion of the Group reveals once more that the opposition was a paper tiger.

In any case, it seems to me that it is less important to determine whether the artists were a legitimate avant-garde than it is to acknowledge the fact that they positioned themselves as such. Setting aside the argument that avant-gardism in any case is less a matter of reality than it is of attitude and consciousness, it is important to remember that, when all the formative influences have been taken into account, both the Group's rhetoric and the members' work can be most closely aligned with what critic S. Morgan Powell described in 1918 as "the blustering spirit of Post-Impressionism," that vanguard movement originally centered in Paris at the end of the nineteenth century. The Group of Seven simply cast post-impressionism in stridently nationalistic terms. In keeping with the avant-garde theory inherited by the artists, for instance, originality was the defining quality of a work of art. It made itself felt through distinctive pictorial effects, which were seen as the product of the creative impulses of the original, or authentic, artist. In the years around the Seven's formation in 1920, the most prolific writers in the Group also argued that work such as theirs was authentically Canadian, and that this was evident, not only in the subject matter, but also in the technique, which in this case registered the creative impulses of the original, Canadian artist.

Circular as this thinking may seem today, at the time it effectively naturalized the artists and their work, and situated them in contrast to what J.E.H. MacDonald described as "painting with a Dutch name on it," that dark, moody, tonal, and now "inauthentic," painting practiced by Canadian followers of northern Europe's Hague school. Seen in art historical terms, they were giving local expression to international ideas in Western art and, in doing so, investing them with the immediate relevance they may have been lacking otherwise. Similarly, the almost unanimous praise British reviewers subsequently awarded the Group's work at Wembley should be read not only as the validating response of a sympathetic, yet knowing, audience but also as evidence of what was by then increasingly widespread acceptance of post-impressionism, or at least of the tempered version practiced by the Group members in 1924. To do otherwise is to

evaluate both the artists' activities and their art in ahistorical terms, ignoring the larger international art scene—and the larger history of art—in favour of a parochial view of the history of art in Canada that substitutes careful examination of the Modernist theory promulgated by the Group of Seven for the type of mystification evident in seventy-five-year-old assertions that "in their quest to discover and affirm a Canadian identity" the Group contributed to the development of "a Canadian art."

Boosterism of the latter sort might establish a celebratory tone for the exhibition, but it also means the National Gallery of Canada is blithely promoting the Group's narrowly defined, exclusive Canadian nationalism, a nationalism based on the notion that there is an essential Canadian identity. Keep in mind that we are a quarter of a century into state support, through government policy, of a Canadian nationality based on the notion of multiculturalism. In this sense alone, it is surprising that a state supported institution would unquestioningly thrust the Group of Seven's work at contemporary audiences as "Art for a Nation." Something is wrong here. The introductory panel to the exhibition clearly states, "The Group's goals were nationalist and their prime audience was English Canadian," and yet the show does not address the implications of this.

Instead, it presents the Group of Seven's work as the standard against which all cultural efforts should be evaluated, the Group's ideals as the defining framework within which all cultural activity should be understood. In a hierarchy with clear gender, ethnic and class dimensions, and with the Group of Seven securely at its top, the artists are praised in a quotation from a 1932 Blodwen Davies article, for instance, for having "gone out of their way to encourage women whose work indicated the same vigorous attitude, the same frank and unconditional conception of the mission of the painter." Evidently intended to counter what Robert Fulford has recently described as "the now common view of the Group as an exclusive boys' club," such a testimonial is only part of what appears to be a larger effort to celebrate the Group as both enlightened and inclusive. Also cited is the Group's collaboration with National Museum ethnologist Marius Barbeau "to preserve a heritage he perceived as menaced by change, indifference, and hostility from a colonized elite." Vaguely identified in the show as "the traditional cultures of Quebec and the West Coast," the contemporary cultures of Aboriginal groups of the Pacific west coast and of the rural, French-speaking *habitant* population of Île d'Orléans and the north shore of the St. Lawrence are delivered to us as evidence of the Group's generous spirit in "preserving" this newly acquired national heritage.

Why not set the latter activity in the larger historical context offered by the international art scene? Why not explain to contemporary audiences that this attempt to incorporate Native work and *habitant* culture into the canon of Canadian art was a nationalized manifestation of a broader effort, in Modernist theory at least, to discredit the academic notion of fixed standards of artistic competence by extending the definition of art to include the work of children, of the untrained and the naive, and of what were seen at the time as the primitive and the folk? Not only would this be in keeping with the exhibition's thesis, but it would also generate the historical distance needed to avoid the type of celebratory account currently proffered in the show. As it stands, the Gallery's insistence on a laudatory narrative brings the exhibition into direct conflict with the very thing the Gallery seems bent on avoiding: current thinking about issues of representation. In the light of such debates, it is no longer so praiseworthy for Barbeau and his friends to have represented other contemporary cultures in Canada as the ancestors of what they presented, contrastingly, as the "modern" Canadian culture to which they belonged. Representing some peoples as "of the past"—as existing in that indeterminate time we call "the traditional"—effectively denied their existence in contemporary time and, thus increasingly in the view of the Group's English-Canadian audience, from consideration as equal participants in modern life. Harnessed as part of a definition of Canadian identity in keeping with the culture of British-Canadians, they were used to give expression to the dominant ethnic nationalism of the time.

The Gallery may want to protect the Group from reconsideration in light of such thinking, but it is a difficult task. The historical record clearly shows that, despite the Gallery's efforts to resuscitate the Group as populist, most of the patrons serviced by the artists belonged to a small, Toronto-based anglo-Canadian elite. (The National Gallery was most intimately connected through the chair of its Advisory Arts Council, Edmund Walker, who was a prominent member of this elite.) As far as support of female artists is concerned, the widely held notion that the Group was an exclusive boys' club may have arisen from the well-known fact that the future Group members came together in the second decade of the century at Toronto's Arts and Letters Club, an exclusive men's you-know-what. Or perhaps the idea was simply

generated by the fact that all the Group members were men. It is beside the point in any case. At this stage in the development of scholarship in the field, it would be critically naive to address the practice of women's history and feminist approaches by simply adding women artists to what is still the story of the Group of Seven.

Yet it appears the Gallery is attempting to do so. More than this, the evidence of the exhibition suggests that it sees recent scholarship and current debates in the field as a threat to its parade. This seems to be the reason it has refused to engage seriously with either. In fact, the massive, 350-page catalogue that accompanies the show summarily dismisses recent approaches to the Group in a scant two-paragraph discussion full of valued prose and questionable generalizations. First, it divides what is, for the field of Canadian art history, a relatively large body of writings into two spurious categories, or "strains": one that is evidently good because it reflects "the powerful influence [the Group's] art and history have had on our perception of Canada" and one that is evidently bad, even irresponsible, because it is produced by scholars who "question the Group's ideology" and present material that casts the artists in a less than reverential light. One writer, who should apparently be damned for even inquiring, "has questioned whether their paintings of Algoma were not intended to assist Sir Edmund Walker and the Canadian Bank of Commerce, which had considerable investments in Algoma Central Railway."

Despite what the Gallery sees only as blasphemy, we already know, for instance, that the Group's oppositional stance was mitigated by the strong support of an emergent nationalist elite. As far as criticism of the Group's associates is concerned, the basis is well established; my own work in this area demonstrates that Group members themselves were intimately involved in appropriation, not only of Aboriginal culture, but also of the *habitant* culture of rural Quebec. The point of such studies, however, is not to criticize the Group of Seven, or for that matter, the National Gallery of Canada, which was also actively involved in these activities. If they now reflect unfavourably on either party, it is in the light of contemporary values, which see the subordination of one culture to the viewpoint of another as a discriminatory act. As A.Y. Jackson put it in a letter from Baie St. Paul, Quebec, in 1924, "The Hotel Victoria has not changed except Joe the proprietor's son has a baby, the first of twenty I expect. [T]he

French idea is 'raise your own immigrants and save on the steamship fare.'"

Jackson's comment also brings us to the question of the artists' business interests, for when he made that now questionable statement, he was on one of his many sketching trips to rural Quebec in the 1920s, a substantial number of which he made with free passes on either the CNR or CPR. In fact, in the 1920s all the major sketching trips by Group members outside Ontario were made with free passes from one of the two major railway companies. And they weren't issued by the railways for altruistic reasons; sensitive to the tourist market, both companies knew there was good cultural advertising to be had from the situation, and so did the artists. They were astute businessmen, in the business of art to be sure, but in business nonetheless. That is why the real possibility exists that Walker and the Group members saw mutual benefits in the artists' plans to paint the landscape along the line of the Algoma Central. To pretend otherwise is to subordinate already ample evidence, both of the artists' business acumen and of their collective ability to cultivate various types of patronage, to an image of the original and thus "authentic" artist as authentically uncommercial.

This image may fit in well with National Gallery's mistaken belief that the Group's rhetoric had to reflect the artists' lived experience to make them a legitimate avant-garde, but the Gallery's blind determination to advance it is no excuse for its dismissal of critical approaches to the period. In other words, I am not saying the problem here is between "old" and "new" art history, or between conservative and revisionary; I do not want to set up a false opposition that ultimately posits the Gallery as defender of tradition. Simply put, the Gallery is not practicing conservative art history, it is practicing poor art history. The National Gallery has simply dismissed what many see as the beginning of a long overdue critical evaluation to introduce its hope that by retelling the tale based on contemporary documents dealing with the Group it will "lay a new groundwork for debate." But that's not how it works. The Gallery cannot set the direction of critical discussion without engaging in it to begin with. That's the nature of debate. That's where the excitement is. That's what the Group of Seven deserves.

Lynda Jessup teaches Canadian art history at Queen's University and recently organized the symposium, "Policing the Boundaries of Modernity/Anti-Modernism and Artistic Experience" for the AGO.

Lament for a Nation



The Racial Geography of "The OH! Canada Project"

by Rinaldo Walcott

Nation

I only mind the absence of this acknowledgment: that perhaps every good thing that stands before us comes at a great cost to someone else.

—Jamaica Kincaid¹

The Art Gallery of Ontario's (AGO) "The OH! Canada Project" (February 16 to May 5, 1996) is an interesting exercise in the political "grammar" of nation and its accompanying narrative myths. Devised as a larger framework for Charles Hill's National Gallery retrospective, "The Group of Seven: Art for a Nation," "The OH! Canada Project" attempts to address questions of landscape and nation from different locations through the inclusion of contemporary "community-based" installations including work by First Nations, Latino, African-Canadian, Chinese and Hamilton-based artists. In so doing, location as a metaphor not only concerns itself with the content of the works in the exhibit, but raises some very serious concerns about the curatorial (institutional) placement of the works themselves.

The Group of Seven's work is located in the spacious Zacks Gallery and is organized in a linear narrative meant to recreate eight exhibits staged from 1920 to 1931. The paintings of the Group and their friends (artists the Group invited to show with them) unfold into room after room; a different room for each of the eight exhibits, which are spatially and temporally separated from the other exhibits in "The OH! Canada Project." On the other hand, the "community-based" component of the exhibition is relegated to the perimeter of a separate gallery space down the hall, in which the

centre of the space is occupied by "interactive" educational materials including computer terminals, a large blackboard for "graffiti" responses, a wall of cards of less ephemeral commentary by the public, a Bravo speaker's corner, and a fax machine.

This difference in location between the Group's work and the "community-based arts groups" is a both a

symbolic and actual representation of the organization of the nation, unwittingly echoing the tensions of a colonizing discourse of nation that has spatially and temporally organized the current landscape of the country. The injuries inflicted in the creation of the settler-colony of Canada has obviously had an impact on and created links

between race, space and place. As Houston Baker put it in a discussion of the blues and American racial landscapes, residency or place can be understood in relationship to race, class and social markers, which can reflect and sometimes actually correspond to geographical location in the nation.² The kind of segregated space that Baker has written about is reproduced in the AGO curatorial practice in regard to the "community-based arts groups." 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.

The "community-based arts groups" are located on what I call the racial trail of "The OH! Canada Project." The Group of Seven occupy the majority of space, while the "community-based arts groups" are placed along a corridor behind the educational displays and promotional gadgetry from the corporate sponsors, the most prominent being the Bravo's speaker's corner (an automatic "public" video recording booth). What placement seems to do is to collapse the art of the "community-based arts groups" into a kind of pop culture collage where those works appear to be just as ephemeral and

disposable as the rants and raves of the "public" soap box of speaker's corner. These works, then, are the disposable scraps or little-used parts of the nation that keep returning to disturb the happy story of the Group of Seven's discovery of Canada's unique national essence in the landscape.

In this current moment of the postcolonial era, when the actual land of the nation-state is under contestation alongside the narratives of how we understand nationalism, nation is often only intelligible within the context of nostalgia. But as Dionne Brand cautions in *No Language is Neutral*, "nostalgia is a lie." As I walked through the Art Gallery of Ontario "The OH! Canada Project," I could overhear folks reminiscing about their imagined collective history. A Canadian past jogged by the pictured memory of the Group of Seven's work became immediate for some viewers. Those memories produced by the encounter with the Group of Seven's particular and specific imaginings and reality of Canada clearly remain only a partial story (picture) of Canada. But nostalgia is always partial, and usually accompanied by a sense of loss. The remembering and simultaneous forgetting that I kept being privy to on that Saturday morning in the AGO was continually fraught with a sense of dispossession, both past and imminent, as folks spoke with deep regrets of a time long gone, no longer possible

to recapture. In this case, loss was the Evil twin, accompanied by a doubling of what had been lost: national unity based on the idea of sameness. For loss is always connected to the present and it is the repression of the reality of contemporary Canada that "The OH! Canada Project" unwittingly accomplished, despite what appeared to be apparent gestures to the contrary.

As I walked the trail of the exhibit I was struck to find myself at a wake, with folks mourning the passing of Canada. However, unlike most wakes, this passing or death was not accompanied with pleasurable remembering. It is in conceiving of the exhibit as a wake that made the connections between loss and nostalgia and their link to the present come together as defining moments of the exhibit for me. The past was not being remembered as an important guide for a more hopeful future, but rather the past was being uncovered as a source for the recovery of things no longer possible—the romance of the unified nation-state and the lie of national sameness. The conversations of the largely Euro-Canadian viewing audience on that Saturday morning were wrapped in the nationalist discourse of "two founding peoples" and sustained by the images of the Group of Seven.

Wakes help us to mourn the past in a manner that makes the past an immediate requirement for coming to terms with the historical present. Thus the mourning that occurs at a wake might be understood as a space where what has been lost is dealt with as an element of what it means to continue living. The exhibit, couched in the discourse of History as event and documentation and narration, charts a particular course of Canada that cannot and does not engage the present. It is this lack of engagement in "The Group of Seven: Art for a Nation" exhibit that makes the AGO's entire "OH! Canada Project" speak so clearly to the present that it represses. In what is referred to as the "community-based arts groups," "the return of the repressed" becomes immediately evident

What the AGO seems to tell us is that an impossibility exists for the formal institutions as they are currently configured to represent those that the very institutions were created to archive, display and gaze at.

in this pictorial display of Canadian nationalism. For colonialism, and Canada is no exception, is founded upon the denial or repression of difference. This repression is often enacted through national narratives that seek to produce myths of national sameness as the basis to escape the messy ethical questions for people who "were not native to the place [they are] in."³

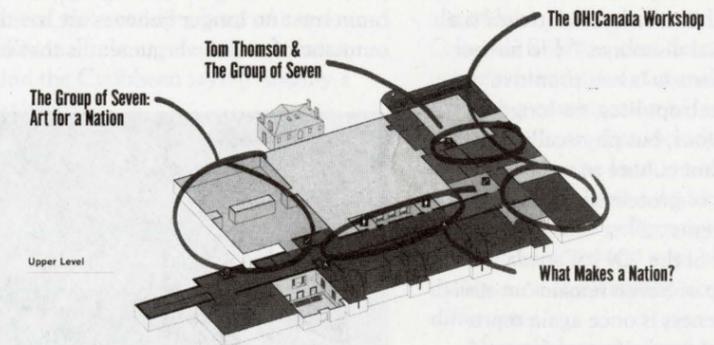
The collapse of the national myth of the unified nation-state of Canada was strongly signaled by the recent results of the Quebec referendum. While I would argue that the referendum itself really points to Canada's continued struggle to resolve the modernist question of what constitutes a nation, the referendum results have caused us to come to terms with the ways in which current configurations of the nation-state are no longer viable. Yet "The OH! Canada Project" is couched in a modernist desire for nation-state sameness. The Group of Seven are called upon in this exhibit to act as the unifying glue that undergirds the narrative myths of unity, and thus the Canadian nation-state.

In the context of the NAFTA agreements, and both federal and provincial governments' attacks on social services, education, and politically alternative culture, a clear message of where nation-state loyalties rest has been sent. Women, children, the working poor and unemployed and all others who are marginal are rendered dispensable in the context of the ongoing reconstruction or dissolving of modern nation-states as we know them. This is a kind of Dickensian era in many respects. We need only to check the causalities of NAFTA and social-service cuts to see evidence of this more clearly. Yet I am by no means prepared to announce the nation-state DEAD, for we have seen the actions of the state apparatus in the recent OPSEU strike (with the OPP acting as robber-baron guards beating up strikers; and the use of archaic laws to intimidate students and symbolically spank them). What is clear is that the confining structures—that is the structures of discipline-and-punish—of the nation-state have been left intact for unruly citizens.

So what does all this have to do with "The OH! Canada Project?" "The OH! Canada Project" has to be understood in light of this discipline-and-punish mentality of the nation-state. I am suggesting that the invitation to "community-based arts groups" to participate and respond or enter into dialogue about the future of Canada is in and of itself one of those attempts to discipline. In the first instance, the potentially unruly were "invited" in to preempt their "bad" behaviour outside the doors of the AGO, (remember "Into The Heart of Africa"), so that the neat packaging provided by "The OH! Canada Project" of national identity could get underway. The location of the

"community-based" installations, spatially removed from the "real" exhibition and placed in a hovel of the gallery, merely causes a certain cynicism to arise concerning the genuineness of the invitation. Despite

the AGO's intentions, the curatorial practices suggest a kind of containment. For community in the narrative of "The OH! Canada Project" means all



those Others who the Group of Seven had to deny or repress to make their narratives of roughing it in the bush and survival intelligible to like-minded image readers. Community, as the exhibit screens it, is those citizens (the working class among them) who do not fit a neat and tidy category of Canadian.

Community as it is produced in the context (the outskirts) of the exhibition also seems to be construed within the (post)modern discourse of "ethnic arts." Ethnic arts might be thought of as part of a continuum of the Western art world discourse of "primitive" art used to categorize

and describe the art of non-Western Others. Rasheed Araeen argues that primitivism arose "as a projection and representation of non-European peoples and cultures in western philosophy and discourse, it in turn justifies western colonial expansion and domination. In other words, primitivism is a function of colonial discourse."⁴ He further states that ethnic arts is "a new 'primitive' within Western metropolises, no longer a Freudian unconscious, but physically present within the dominant culture as *exotic*, with all the paraphernalia of grotesque sensuality, vulgar entertainments..."⁵

In the context of the "OH! Canada" exhibit, the Group of Seven remain "un-ethnified." Anglo-whiteness is once again reproduced as the site of normalization for Canadian identity. Dennis Reid, the AGO curator of Canadian historical art, supports this view in *Now Magazine*: "Arthur Lismer and Edwin Holgate wrote about the importance of amateur artists and the inclusion of the arts in all aspects of life."⁶ Notions of "amateur artists" continually render the aesthetic expression of non-European Canadians as "ethnic" art, and therefore not really art. It is the experience, and gaze—should we say insight—of Euro-Canadians (specifically white male Canadians) that constitutes the vital and expressive qualities of Art, because their experiences transcend what Christopher Hume in *The Toronto Star* calls the "therapy" of the accompanying exhibits.⁷ After listing some of the events that are supposed to make "Art for a Nation" inclusive of Canadian difference, Hume suggests that: "Against such a disparate backdrop, the very notion of Canadian culture seems irrelevant. Maybe that's why so many of the events comprising 'OH! Canada' feel like therapy."⁸

While the questions posed in the didactic panels accompanying the exhibit, "What makes a Nation—Land, People, Stories?" smack of a kind of pop psychology of longing and loss, Hume's comments are a camouflage for asserting a particular narrative of the nation that cannot yet acknowledge difference as fundamental to it. For at the same time that the curators of the exhibition define "community" as anyone who is not Euro-Canadian, Hume's critique seeks to

reinstate white male experience as the only legitimate source for defining Canada. Thus Hume's comments conclude by asserting that the only "real" art in the exhibit is the Group of Seven. He writes, "[t]he struggle now is to get people into the gallery. Judging from the OH! Canada, it seems the AGO brain trust no longer believes art has the ability to accomplish that."⁹ The outcome of such an argument is that only the Group's work might be considered Art. It is that kind of argument that can have Hume celebrate the Royal Ontario Museum's Chinese exhibit but implicitly dismiss the Lok Tok Art Studio's *Cultures In Reflection* at the AGO. The ROM's Chinese exhibit, for critics like Hume, are in their right place: archived and preserved as a relic of the past, but not engaged in a conversation that seeks to (re)design the present and the future.



this "discovery" have attempted to negotiate what the terms of working with and in "public" institutions like museums and art galleries to include their perspectives could be. While such negotiations can never be complete, the current rendering of the invitation extended to the "community-based arts groups" is certainly a claw-back of the gains of the last two decades. Despite the tremendous amount of very important work that has been undertaken—both in terms of installations, film, video, painting, multimedia and theory and criticism (written)—publicly funded museums and galleries continually fail to adequately represent the work of the Others, in this case "ethnic" Canadians. Thus it is still useful to pose the question: Is it possible for the institutional structures of museums and art galleries to engage in the complex politics of representation with regard to the work of Others?

What the critiques of museum and gallery practices by those excluded has produced is invitations to participate, but in the background. Forced to move from seeing the Other in archival terms to seeing the Other as part of contemporary culture, museums invite the Other in to display their "ethnic art" or their "now-ness." By that, what the museum, and in this case the AGO, accomplishes

Top: gallery housing "What Makes a Nation," heading to "The OH! Canada Workshop."
Bottom: entrance to "The OH! Canada Workshop," featuring a monitor displaying speaker's corner video clips. Photo credit for gallery photos: Loredana Sangiuliano.

is the pictorial evidence of representation in the strictest sense of the word. Left undisturbed are the dominant relations: who gets to invite, order, display and in this case hide the work of the Others. For while "new" relations are couched in the discourse of equity, openness and multiculturalism, what is being represented are the sites of confinement, the unending bind of imprisonment with an outcome that still spells exclusion. To be inside does not mean that one is equal. This practice calls to mind the Caribbean saying (usually a parental reprimand) of "being seen but not heard."

In fact, the spatial and temporal construction of "The OH! Canada Project" makes this quite clear. The "community-based arts groups" presence is the loud silence of the parts of the nation that are unrepresentable. The "community-based arts groups" are both those that cause the loss that Euro-Canadians walking through the exhibit reminisced against, and they are lost within the spatial configuration of the exhibition. I continue to wonder how many people saw the "community-based arts groups" installations? How many people walked the path to the conclusion of "The OH! Canada Project?" How many people wondered and wandered about the "new" configuration of the nation? How many nostalgic gallery goers "discovered" the location of the "community-based arts groups" exhibits and therefore found the "now-ness" of Canada?



important to point out that the artists involved all refused the burden of representation in their installations. For example, Art Starts, a store-front cultural centre on Eglinton/Oakwood area, invites viewers through their installation to

Top: recording booth for speaker's corner; the fax display is to the right.
Middle: view along a portion of the "community-based" exhibition space.
Bottom: web access terminals and project area adjacent to the "graffiti" blackboard.

visit them at their home location: placing the onus on the viewers' commitment to travel—across space and time—to really engage and dialogue with their work. The Lok Tok Studio—as a design company it causes us to consider how community is being conceptualized here—mounted an installation, *Cultures in Reflection*, that deconstructs the us/them binarism of national discourse through a combination of landscape paintings and mirrors that includes the viewer in the piece. Yet the location of these artists' works in the exhibit—hidden away in a corner, the racial geography of the exhibition—forecloses any possibility of a dialogue or conversation across "Canadian" differences.

Nonetheless, the "communities" they are supposed to represent remain here, shaping and refashioning Canada. In relationship to the politics of location in the exhibition, the politics of the racial geography of Canada has many lessons to offer. First Nations reserves stand as actual and symbolic spaces and places where the repression of the Other takes place. The destruction of Africville remains a signpost of nation-state repression. The (re)location of Caribana from University Ave. at the centre of the city to Lakeshore Blvd. at its periphery, what has been referred to by some visitors as the "back," is another example. In Caribana's case place, space and terrain work to contain the revelers, reinforcing the spatial organization of territory and signaling control. Any temporal possibilities of/for resistance are regulated and confined within the panoptic gaze of nation-state authorities (the police). The tumble over turf that carnivals usually represent is rendered mute or at least sharply curtailed partially because of the location of this potentially resisting spectacle.

In the context of the racial geography that exists outside the walls of the AGO, the location of the "community-based arts groups" installations inside the gallery highlight some of the *incommensurability* of an invitation to participate that might not be genuine. This is not meant to be disingenuous to the possibility of reforming the museum and gallery practices. What I mean to highlight are the ways in which invitations need to be thought

through so that the dynamics currently evident in "The OH! Canada Project" do not reproduce the same old story of exclusion and marginalization with a new twist (exclusion on the inside). So while Rosemary Donegan the coordinator/curator found some installations that critically responded to "Art for a Nation," the location of these installations renders the possibility of any sustained talk quite limited, if not impossible.

Let me elaborate by using an example. The First Nations installation was put together by the Gei ni yo gwê dage (Four People Together) who wrote in their statement that First Nations have no word for landscape. Landscape is a part of the interior life of the people. Yet in the institutional mapping of "The OH! Canada Project," there is very little possibility for a cross-cultural dialogue that would have this absence of the word landscape among First Nations engage with the prominence of the word among the "founding nations." Part of what forecloses the possibility of dialogue is that the First Nations exhibit is placed in an area of reservation. The distance between the Group of Seven and the Gei ni yo gwê dage installation seems to merely restate the reserve practice of the modern nation-state of Canada and thus to echo the history of this settler-colony that occupies native land.

In "The Group of Seven: Art for a Nation," very few of the works on display are studies by the artists of Canada's First Nations peoples. The explicit representation of "Indian" pieces in the exhibition, of which A.Y. Jackson's (*Kispayaks Village* and *Indian Home*) and Emily Carr's (*Kitwancool*, totemic figures) work stand out, are in some ways the symbol of what the images of barren landscape must conceal or deny. While I am not interested in making a case for some kind of numeric representation, for such an argument can only fail in the context of questions of ethics and justice, what is clear is the way in which the First Nations' presence is repressed

The past was not being remembered as an important guide for a more hopeful future, but rather the past was being uncovered as a source for the recovery of things no longer possible.

in the many narrative myths of Canadian national identity. What Jackson's and Carr's paintings reveal is that in the very act of repression there is almost and surely a guaranteed return of the silenced. The "Indian" pieces symbolize for me the limit of the work of the Group to produce a narrative of Canada that could move beyond a mythic Euro-Canadian homogeneity and intellectually engage with cultural difference as an act of ethical imaginings.

The "absented presence"¹⁰ of the First Nations reinforces ideas of discovery, wilderness and barren lands as propagated by the peopleless landscapes of the Group of Seven. As Jimmy Durham, a First Nations artist, has argued, the perpetuation of a narrative of nation that is founded upon "a never-ending search for true virgin territory. Untouched wilderness. Breaking new ground. Thrusting through the barriers to new frontiers."¹¹ The rhetoric that sustains this narration is strongly restated in the racial geography of "The OH! Canada Project." In many respects, the "community-based" installations are posited within a context of discovery in the gallery; you might happen upon them if you are adventurous enough. What is evident from the terrain of community that "The OH! Canada Project" claims as territory, but misuses as the very thing that needs to be repressed, is that the spatial and temporal distance between the "community-based arts groups" and the Group of Seven tends to echo how state authorities, reflected in the institutions, imagine and organize the participation of "ethnic" Canadians in the nation—invited in but required to be quiet?

Given the distance mapped between the terrain of the "community-based arts groups" and the territory of the Group of Seven, art critic John Bentley Mays' pleadings in *The Globe and Mail* become laughable. He writes:

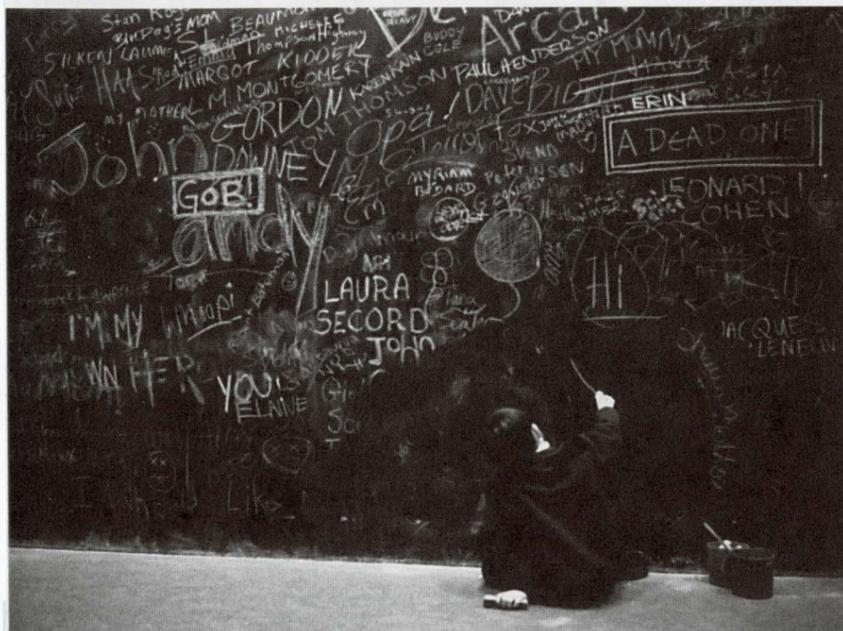
Not to worry, however: the historic pictures in *Art for a Nation* have been herded out of sight into the cul-de-sac Zacks Wing. In fact, if art's not your thing, the AGO is making it really easy to avoid it. The whole family can stay out in the long upper hallway and series of galleries the AGO has transformed into a bright busy midway of cultural entertain-hibition. It's an interactive celebration of the art of Canada.¹²

Growing up in a colonial and neo-colonial place, I always thought that cul-de-sacs were the places where privileged people hung out or lived. Maybe I was mistaken. With little mention of the constraints that lead to the kind of corporate sponsorship that galleries must seek in these deficit-reduction times, Mays' critique of the corporate cheerleading in the "midway" of the exhibition seems a bit trite when he fails to take up the current ideology of cutbacks and deficit reduction that is plaguing many public institutions and therefore opening them up to the "new arts innovators" like Bravo. Mays' disdain for the "corporate partners" exhibitionism might be a bit more palatable if he did not feel the need to also dismiss the art of all those whom he calls "professionally marginal people" along with the "corporate partners."

Mays saves some of his most dismissive and uniformed comments for the video installation by Latino Crew. He reduces their installation to griping about

Kitwancool, Emily Carr, 1928, oil on canvas, 101x83 cm.





who symbolically do not belong. Bodies begin to match up to social practices, racialized as criminal, deviant and outsiders who must be policed and even deported if necessary.

The juvenile debate in the mainstream press that accompanied the Latino Crew installation on whether or not graffiti was art is just one small example of the ways in which some folks find those bodies and their practices to be unacceptable to the nation. The everyday realities of those folks will not be the material used for building national stories. However, the powerful testimony of the young men and women in the video is a narration of resistance to practices of neo-colonialism within the context of this settler-colony called Canada.

In that part of the exhibit displaying the public's interaction with "The OH! Canada Project," faxes hanging on the walls often suggest that many believe too much space has

been given over to those "unwanted" bodies that the Latino Crew insists are a part of the nation. Many of those faxes reproduce ideas that suggest limiting "space" for Others and interestingly, match up with the actual space accorded the "community-based arts groups" installations. The vitriolic expressions of racism that have been faxed in as answers to "the question of the week" do not, however, go unanswered. It is the talking back and the loud silences of the Others—resistance, that is—that renders nostalgia for the modern nation a project that is no longer one that public institutions should easily endorse. Some gallery-goers come to express their desire for the past, while others come to insist on confronting the silences of history and the refashioning of the present as a map for a more hopeful future.

Thinking about a more hopeful future, The Hammer Collective's *Work-in-Progress Project No. 2* is a critique of the downside of industrialization and urbanization on the environment. The human redesigning of the landscape raises ethical questions concerning the interconnectedness of human beings and the land. The Hammer Collective's work places actual bodies in the picture as an indication of the connectedness between land and people. Such representations of the intricate connection between human beings and the land demonstrate how profit-driven industrialization has rendered both land and people disposable. The landscape in our postindustrial and hyper-urbanized world is often fashioned out of human abuses and misuses of it. Actual bodies are left behind when corporations take flight after exploiting land and human beings, part of the disposable shrubbery of postindustrial societies.

The placement of The Hammer Collective Project within the racial geography of the "community-based" installations appears to veer from the "ethnic" trail of "The OH! Canada Project." I would strongly suggest, however, that in the context of today's current deficit-reduction ideology, job layoffs and cutbacks, the project can also be understood as "ethnicized" in the context of

how bad Canada is for immigrants and suggests that the Crew implies joining gangs is the outcome of this ill-treatment. Mays' "reading" of the Latino Crew installation is clearly his desire to have an "angel and insect" nation. The Latino Crew video and accompanying photographs further attenuate the disjuncture in what could have been the emergence of a crossroads dialogue concerning nation, place, space and the articulation of these issues with racism and other hindrances to "national" belonging.

One of the photographs that accompanies the Latino Crew exhibit is of the Allen Expressway. The photograph dramatizes the way in which that stretch of asphalt occupies a central role in the organization of territory and possibly experience. The Allen Expressway is clearly a point that both connects and disconnects all those "coloured" immigrant others to the centre of power Toronto. Those neighbourhoods (Lawrence Heights, Jane and Finch, etc.) where Latino and Black bodies reside under the continued surveillance of state authorities (police especially, but immigration officers as well) are largely cut off by the Allen Expressway, which marks the beginning of new turf. The Allen is a runway to some of Canada's "ghettos," but what that path leads to are all those

neo-conservative politics. Any honest discussion of immigration and unemployment in Canada has to be understood within the context of an underlying unspoken. That unspoken is often a gesture to what Toni Morrison in the American context calls an *Africanist* presence¹³ but which we might think of in Canada as a "coloured presence." Notions of immigrant, unemployed and welfare are cast in the popular and everyday discourse as codes for Canada's immigrant Others. Within this unspoken, the terms of race and class are collapsed in "OH! Canada," with the absented presence of Canada's Others, including the unemployed, shut out of the narration of the nation and left on the borders of the exhibit reproducing the old-time narrative of margin/centre. What a wonderful way to symbolically represent dominant relations in a time when those relations are faltering and in crisis. We live in an age when the margin and the centre are quite difficult to tell apart from each other. But the racial geography of the AGO's exhibition seems to want to return to a much clearer evocation of "the order of things." What the AGO seems to tell us is that an impossibility exists for the formal institutions as they are currently configured to represent those that the very institutions were created to archive, display and gaze at. Is it possible for institutions created in the moment of colonization to represent those who were colonized?

What is the price of the repression that is being enacted in this celebration of the Group of Seven? The inability of national narratives to come to terms with the settler-colony aspects of the nation, the racial forgetfulness concerning slavery in Canada, and all the other atrocities that accompany colonization are only obliquely hinted at in the framing of "The Group of Seven: Art for a Nation" within "The OH! Canada Project." The inadequacy of the frame has been highlighted, yet some "truths" need to be told. Oka was a violent return of the repressed that has since seen many "smaller" eruptions in Ontario, Quebec and British Columbia. Resistance to narratives of nation that seek to render people invisible take place against the back drop of a land that is now resident to many differences.

As many of the aspects of modern nations give way to new constructions (the First Nations land deal in B.C. recently; new relations with Quebec; multiple transborder trading agreements in the Americas) the only thing useful about nations might be the terms of residence. Growing up in the Caribbean, a place from which much emigration happens, folks remaining there were always interested in whether or not one had "permanent residency." Permanent residency, however, is not only the legal apparatus through which one creates "home," but the right to have some say about the terms of tenancy. How one organizes and reorganizes home and living is of crucial importance. What becomes apparent in the public discourse (Mays, Hume and others too numerous to name) concerning "ethnic" Canadians is that many cannot stomach our desires to participate fully in the creation of the terms of residency. At the same time the state institutions attempt to render us even more invisible as they "invite" us to participate.³

In the final analysis, the racial trail of "The OH! Canada Project" ends up cataloguing all the elements that are symptoms of what ails the nation. This attempt at re-narration of nation is locked in a nostalgic moment of untruths, as oppositional discourses simultaneously unravel those untruths at the seams.

While the exhibit is framed around a retrospective look at the Group of Seven and their limited image narrative of the nation, what is significant is that the "The OH! Canada Project" does not address the politics of their location. In other words, the struggle over turf has been sidestepped and repressed: for what the celebratory nature of "The OH! Canada Project" fails to adequately acknowledge is "the great cost to someone else"¹⁴ that celebratory narratives of settler-colonies always hide.

I wish to thank Dot Tuer and Katarzyna Rukszo for their insightful help in the writing of this article.

Photos of the exhibition areas by Loredana Sangiuliano.

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Notes

1. Jamaica Kincaid, "The Flowers of Empire," *Harper's Magazine*, April 1996, p. 31.
2. Houston Baker, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).
3. Jamaica Kincaid, *op. cit.*, p. 29.
4. Rasheed Araeen, "From Primitivism to Ethnic Arts," in *The Myth of Primitivism*, ed. Susan Hiller (London: Routledge, 1991).
5. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
6. Deidre Hanna, *NOW Magazine*, 29 February 1996, p. 87.
7. Christopher Hume, *The Toronto Star*, 14 February 1996, p. D5.
8. *Ibid.*, p. D5.
9. *Ibid.*, p. D5.
10. Jimmie Durham, "Cowboys And...", *Third Text*, Autumn 1990, p. 12.
11. Jimmie Durham, "The Search for Virginity," *The Myth of Primitivism: Perspectives on Art*, ed. Susan Hiller (London: Routledge, 1991) p. 289.
12. John Bentley Mays, *The Globe and Mail*, 17 February 1996.
13. Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).
14. Jamaica Kincaid, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

Native Love

Subverting the Boundaries of the Heart

by Abasiw Maskegon-Iskwew

Mark in ... [you wild Indian's] face what various passions low'r
And rule his bosom with alternate power!
Revenge, to mercy deaf to reason blind,
That scorns forgiveness as beneath his mind,
Exulting Rage, with human tortures fed,
That rears the Scalp his triumph o'er the dead...¹



untitled, Barbara Robertson and Eric Robertson,
1995, abalone shell, felt,
embroidery hoop, 38 cm diameter.

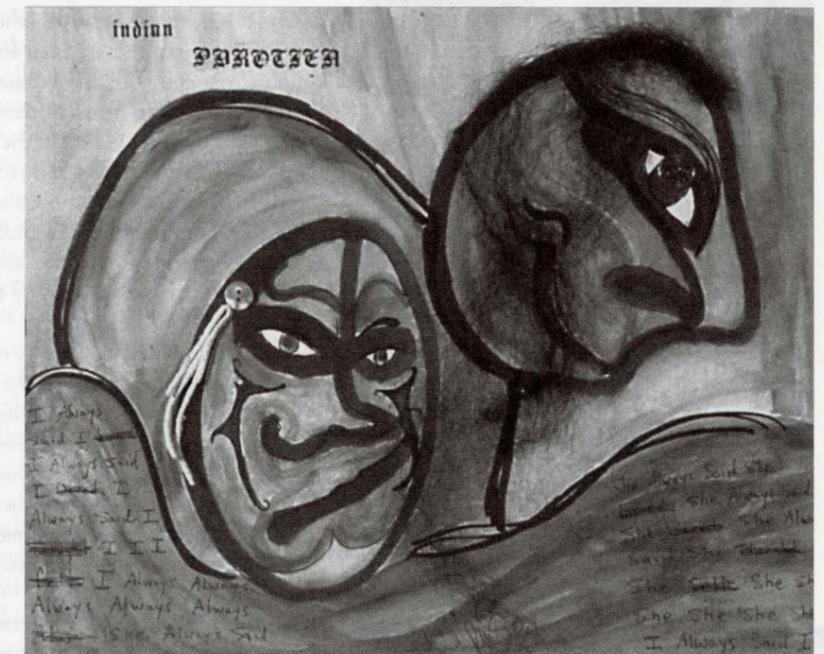
Domestic and sexual relationships are especially vicious. The women are lecherous, even from "the age of eleven or twelve years," and as wives, are seldom without a lover despite the "vigilance and severity" of their husbands. The men, on the other hand, "are very subject to jealousy, and fatal consequences frequently result from the indulgence of that passion."²

The exhibition "Native Love" is an important step in bringing together First Nations visual art, video art and writing through collaborations on new works about the topic of love from a First Nations perspective. It is important because it speaks primarily to First Nations people about love without being overwhelmed by the need to redress past white insults and derision about "Native Love," and without trying to didactically teach anyone about First Nations culture or post-contact history. This is not an exhibition of non-First Nations images and words about "Native Love," nor is it a commentary on those words and images. The works in this exhibition reveal a rich interplay of love that holds families together, that supports friendship, that provides hope within mourning, that connects and maintains communities, that illuminates irony, and that produces humour—a foundation

Native Love:
Sponsored and hosted
by AKA Artists' Centre
and Tribe, Inc., Saskatoon.

March 30 – April 27, 1996

Curated and developed
by Nation to Nation.
With curator's talk
by Tricia Fragnito and artist's
talk by Eric Robertson.



Indians After Sex Part 2,
Rose Spanan and Jeanette Armstrong,
1995, collage, 20.3 x 25.4 cm.

stone of Native society. It goes beyond expectations in the same way that Thomson Highway describes when he speaks of his play *The Rez Sisters*:

I'm sure some people went to Rez expecting crying and moaning and plenty of misery, reflecting everything they've heard about or witnessed on reserves. They must have been surprised. All that humour and love and optimism, plus the positive values taught by Indian mythology.³

This exhibition is also important because it is part of a very small number of attempts to focus on this topic within an artist-run exhibition context. It is certainly one of the first that concentrates on the works of First Nations artists. When compared to non-First Nations Western art practice, "Native Love" stands alone because the topic of love in contemporary art is taboo, and the origins of this taboo disable a genuine understanding of the origins and structures of love in First Nations culture. In Western contemporary art, love has become a source of mistrust because of male-dominated oppression in the construction of gender differences, family structure and Western culture in general; as a result of contemporary pulp fiction and schlock mass media, love has also been treated as an emotional vacuum with no serious artistic validity. Instead, contemporary artists concentrate on sexuality, the body, identity, cultural and racial difference, gender, sexism, psychoanalysis, desire, aberration



and the panic implosion of contemporary culture. All of these are valid and valuable examinations of contemporary culture and each has the capacity to extend toward examining love (and sometimes do), but contemporary art works are rarely brought together for exhibition based on the concept of love (except in the case of Lesbian and Gay work but even then the theme of homophobic oppression often necessarily takes centre stage).

The panic implosion of contemporary Western culture seeps into everything resulting, for some, in the question: "why should I bring a child into a world such as this?" White birth rates in Canada continue to fall (while First Nations demographics show a much higher ratio of children to adults, a ratio that continues to increase annually). In their descriptions of contemporary culture concerning panic sex and processed feminism, Arthur Kroker and David Cook describe the baby as:

already a key site for the play of a dead power with and against the body of women: a perfect scene for the merger of technologies associated with the medicalization of the body, the investiture of desire with a code of prevention, and the production of designer babies equal to the possibilities of cultural genetics; babies whose television fare at the age of six includes "The Young and the Restless," initiating them into the video world of sex without secretions. If babies are born postmodern, it's just because their bodies are lacerated by the language of the key technologies of power.⁴

Combine this image of Western cultural decay with the antiseptic certainty of the Lacanian psychoanalytic construction of desire that predominates in Western art theory and there is little basis for any discussion of love. In this construction of desire, the baby, before gaining any sense of him or herself as an individual, considers its basic relationship to the mother to be a perfect world. The second stage involves recognizing its own individuality but, as the theory goes, whatever individual the baby thinks it is will never be a true representation of itself, especially when it is also trying to be what others want it to be (the mirror stage). The third stage is the child's recognition of rules and values when it learns language. This further elaborates the identity of the child but also further distorts and controls what the child can be because of the limitations and definitions of language itself and the social codes it represents.

The essential point is that this theory of psychoanalysis proposes a process whereby each stage of personal development, except for the very first, imposes upon each of us an increasing sense of lacking the perfection of the first stage of being, a continuing distortion of self-awareness due to the identities imposed upon us by others, and the inadequate but controlling nature of language and society in which we can't adequately express a self. In this theory we always will desire to be and to have what we can't. A permanent lack. In describing an apparently simple child's request for a drink as having a much deeper meaning, authors Robert Lapsley and Michael Westlake state that it is "Typically figured as the demand for unconditional love, it is bound to remain unsatisfied because no such love exists—hence Lacan's comment that loving is giving what one does not have."⁵



...thus my open heart, Ryan Rice and Aaron Rice, 1995, wood, fabric, metallic paint.

The necessary reaction to any theory, especially when it seems so final and encompassing but doesn't include your experience, is to find another way of thinking about the topic. In terms of trying to provide a comparison between how the "Native Love" exhibition works with something even vaguely similar in contemporary Western art, the book *Uncontrollable Bodies*, co-edited by Rodney Sappington and Tyler Stallings,⁶ seems a good bet. It too combines collaborative combinations of images and text, in this case in an anthology of works about the body that "dwell on the specific—on the power and urgency of social struggle found in the gestures of daily living. Intimacy is sacred—packed with boundaries, limits, assumptions, privatization, silences, isolation—and an area in which seemingly innocent decisions are made in danger" (Rodney Sappington in his introduction to *Uncontrollable Bodies*, p. 11). But, in a rich and powerful collection of works, this is as close as it gets to organizing itself around love. What it does offer is a way out of the nihilistic combination of panic cultural implosion and the psychology of lack, bringing it much closer to "Native Love" but still a long way off as I describe later on. I bracketed the phrase "mirror stage" above to bring a connection to the following part of Tyler Stallings' introduction describing the authors and artists in *Uncontrollable Bodies*:

They admit to recognizing something when looking in a mirror. If another mirror is set opposite this mirror, it creates an infinite vision, as reflections reflect one another. The mirrors are set perhaps by their hands or by someone else's. The contributors ask how we function when so many mirror handlers and so many reflections are simultaneously apparent. This question also highlights the significant use of images in this anthology.

The contributors' answers in part are a view of themselves as bodies separate from their reflections, but also acknowledge that these reflections inform the creation of their identity. This conundrum suggests that in an in-depth perception of one's world may occur only when a point of observation is chosen at least momentarily—not a point from which to transcend, but one upon which to stand so that one's world can envelop, split and multiply oneself. The contributors suggest that "experience" is constructed through immersion in the confusion between who produces meaning and who consumes meaning.

Our state of immersion [in co-editorship] is an example of how one's image is created, by oneself and others, through perception/projection and mirroring/portrayal. This formula of complicity in making one's image produces a vulnerable state. The contributors create a similar state of vulnerability not only in their subject matter but through their use of imagery, thereby extending the dialogue about how they perceive themselves.⁷

This discussion of works on the body provides an opening for participating in creating an identity so that one has a deeper capacity to participate in the act of loving, and toward establishing a state of vulnerability that can be open to being loved. The profound depth of love is firmly rooted in questions of

An Erratic Song

What love is native to a stone? The love of falling, rolling, tumbling down, the love of gravity — not to be mistaken for either that of earth or eternity, the two whose own shared love gave stone its birth. But after the fall down mountains is done, after the stone's come down to dirt, is berthed tectonically, what else might a stone by nature or dreams desire? What love is native to a dark, cold, heavy heart then?

The love of water through the soil? Yes, that rainbow flow and colour — oh, rivers and transparency! And the love of heat, even fire — which is also love of light and lightness, best known as levity. And the love that brought your face up for air last spring. Yes, after aeons underground, it appeared again in a furrow, bleared with clay yet clear as a planet, full with all the loves above, loves native to it.

— Daniel David Moses, from his collaboration with Shelly Niro



Erratic Love (detail), Shelly Niro and Daniel David Moses, 1995, stone, beaded pillow & frame, iron stands, Plexiglas.

COSMOSQUAW

March 1996



10 *Easy* make-up
tips for a

killer
Bingoface!

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getting tired of
the same old dish?

Learn How to
Spoon-feed *your* Man!

Why He'll Always Come
Back For Seconds

identity and culture. It is easy to see why it has ducked its head in the theoretical warfare of Western contemporary art practice. Love for First Nations people is also deeply rooted in questions of identity and culture but in ways that are significantly different from Western concerns. What follows is a general theory pieced together from various bits and pieces and from my responses to the works in the "Native Love" exhibition, one which I hope can lead others to further elaboration and/or correction. It is also general because there is little hope of trying to discuss in one article, or of having one author discuss the broad range of cultural origins and sources that inform the works in the "Native Love" exhibition. The following caution from Rigoberta Menchu also encourages generalization, especially in discussions of such an intimate nature.

We Indians have always hidden our identity and kept our secrets to ourselves. That is why we are discriminated against. We often find it hard to talk about ourselves because we know we must hide so much in order to preserve our Indian culture and prevent it being taken away from us... I'm still keeping secret what I think no-one should know. Not even anthropologists or intellectuals, no matter how many books they have, can find out all our secrets.⁸

The first experience of love for all people takes place in childhood. Very early on similarities in this experience within different cultures begin to dissolve or vanish altogether. Traditional First Nations child-rearing methods incorporating cultural values, language and spirituality are significantly different from those practiced by people in contemporary Western culture. First Nations people are now often living in urban centres and a tragic number of First Nations languages have been endangered and some lost. Thankfully, many are now being taught in schools. While there have been, in some cases, generations separating contemporary First Nations people from total cultural immersion, it is important to note that "sentence structure, accents, and body language can be retained for as long as three generations after a language has been lost. Jaune Quick-To-See Smith feels that her "right-brain" thought process, with its dependence on imaging, relates to the sign language, glyphs, and pictograms developed in such complexity by pre-contact Native peoples, and she finds many in her community who agree."⁹

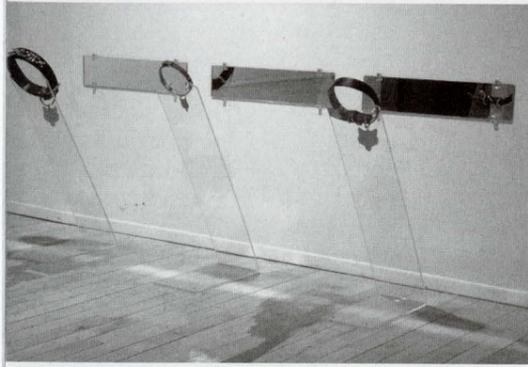
First Nations languages and values are alive and healthy in many communities and families, and their influence is broadening steadily. But even in those where language retention is at risk or has been lost, values, family structures and child-rearing methods are still often firmly based on traditional ways. One of the aspects of First Nations child-rearing that came under early criticism from white colonizers is the practice of extending aspects of childhood such as breast-feeding, and the safe expectation of a high degree of tolerance from care-givers beyond infancy into early or mid-childhood.

Non-coercive teaching based on a child's own skills and interests is also an important aspect of this tolerant attitude, which was based on an important concept. Children were given the opportunity to participate fully in the development of their own unique character and identity and were closely watched to see what might emerge and how that could be successfully integrated into

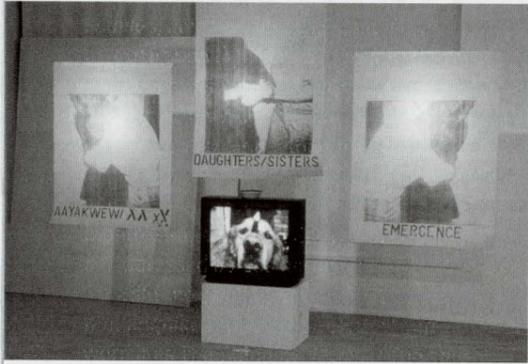
Crossing the frontier from sleep into wakefulness you first touch the borders, then enter the tourist trap on my colonized body: this body that I can barely remember belongs to me. Gaudy, numb and bloodless, a carcass from a wax museum on Niagara Falls. Am I the Woman who fell from the Sky World? Changing Woman moulding bloody clay form the soft underside of her breasts? Can you still hear the warnings of White Buffalo Calf Woman? The wails of the earth? ...and where is the testimony heard of the territory stolen from between our bodies? ...A taste, sometimes only a half-remembered taste between our lips of something vaguely familiar — metallic like blood and bitter shame."

— Monique Mojica, an excerpt from "A FAST GROWING MOULD BITTER AS SHAME" incorporated into the piece *A World View on Native Love* by Jani Lauzon in collaboration with the audience of the "Native Love" exhibition.

Cosmosqua, Lori Blondeau and Bradlee LaRocque, 1996, Duratrans light box.



Lick, Kill, Frolic, Mary Anne Barkhouse, Florene Belmore and Michael Belmore, 1995, Plexiglas stands, mirrors, dog collars, engraved dog tags.



Beans, Ruth Cuthand and Thirza Jean Cuthand, 1996, installation with video component.

Opposite:
Awl and Case, Paul Chaat Smith and Diane Chaat Smith, 1995, bone, leather, beads.

the community in its own right. Even aspects of identity that were significantly different from the norm in terms of mental or physical ability or gender identity were accorded this tolerance and respect and were sometimes elevated to a rank of significant social and spiritual influence. "If nature makes a person different, many Indians conclude, a mere human should not undertake to counter this spiritual dictate. Someone who is 'unusual' can be accommodated without being stigmatized as 'abnormal'."¹⁰ Lame Deer explained that "To us a man is what nature, or his dreams, make him. We accept him for what he wants to be. That's up to him."¹¹ The concept that identity originates as a gift from a spirit world beyond the scope of human society underlies the primary difference between the First Nations conception of love and that of Western culture.

Another important difference is that First Nations individuality is in many ways secondary to ties to community and that human beings themselves are only part of a much larger community:

The emphasis of American Indian religions... is on the spiritual nature of all things. To understand the physical world, one must appreciate the underlying spiritual essence. Then one can begin to see that the physical is only a faint shadow, a partial reflection, of a supernatural and extrarational world. By the Indian view, everything that exists is spiritual. Every object—plants, rocks, water, air, the moon, animals, humans, the earth itself—has a spirit... Such a view promotes a sophisticated ecological awareness of the place that humans have in the larger environment. The function of religion is not to condemn or to change what exists, but to accept the realities of the world and to appreciate their contributions to life. Everything that exists has a purpose.¹²

This is succinctly summed up by Paula Gunn Allen: "The physical aspect of existence is only representative of what is real."¹³

Both loving and being loved take on very complex ramifications within this framework. As soon as a child goes beyond early childhood and the all-encompassing love for direct caregivers, a vastly more intricate web of potential love relationships opens up. This is not to say that there is no accompanying fear and respect for evil and dangerous spiritual and physical forces but even these can sometimes be turned, through strategy or good fortune, into elements worthy of love. Love itself can also become, through misadventure or evil intervention, a dangerous force.

This complexity also indicates that the English words for love and respect are woefully inadequate to describe the powerful emotions and commitments engendered in people who are woven into this web. A deeply personal and unmediated relationship to the land and spirits also sometimes goes beyond any language. While language and cultural values are very significant, many personal experiences such as dreams, visions, and coalescing events that function spiritually beyond the definition of mere coincidence often are unnamable, lack descriptors in language, and can only be hinted at, or communicated with assistance from the spirit world.

Grief and mourning are also deeply implicated in the discussion of love within this spiritual context. There is little that can be done to lessen the

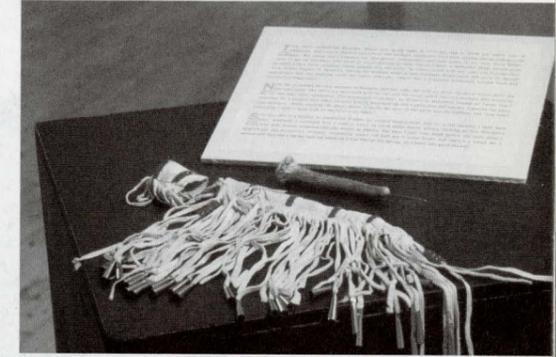
shock of the sudden loss of a deeply loved relation, partner, friend or leader, but assurance can be sought for the continued presence and influence of that person's spirit in daily life. If enough time is allowed before this transition, grief is greatly lessened and mourning enriched. Much of nature is available as a new form of communication for those who open their senses to these voices. Much of so-called coincidence teems with the influence of ancestors. Careful watch is also sometimes made, over many generations in some cases, to seek indications of the possibility of reincarnation or deeply influential guidance. Giving the name of an ancestor to a new child can also attempt to bestow this guiding presence.

The strength of self-identity and connection to families and community within this spiritually rich environment has enabled many First Nations cultures to survive and to continue living growth and development under sometimes extreme adversity. Love (insert more appropriate and accurate First Nations words and concepts here) has been the supreme essence that has fueled this survival and will continue to do so. A common saying about pre-contact chiefs and leaders was that they were some of the most materially poor people in the community and were the ones who made the greatest sacrifices. This practice of giving to the community is still common in many First Nations and can only take place in an enriching environment of love and respect.

The works in the "Native Love" exhibition orbit around a highly personal examination of intimate and powerful emotions and relations rather than a broad-ranging analysis of cultural conflicts. The irony, however, is that the way these emotions and relationships originate and are maintained in First Nations cultures is at the heart of the most important cultural conflict that First Nations people have faced as a result of contact with white people. Jimmy Durham says, "To be an American Indian artist is quite possibly to be more sophisticated than many white artists for what should be obvious reasons... It would be impossible, and I think immoral, to attempt to discuss American Indian art sensibly without making political realities central."¹⁴

Heeding this advice, I write that life for First Nations people has not been kind since white people came to Turtle Island. For every one of us here today, there should be at least ten others alive to help build the future—their spirits certainly are. Annihilation through war, disease, starvation, poverty and internalized racism left such huge and long-lasting gashes of grief and hopelessness in many of those left alive that the recovery of the healing and strengthening force of love has been impossible for many, and has been felt for generations among some families and communities, especially since both subtle and explicit racist violence can (and does) explode in our faces at any moment.

The attempt to recover the complex capacity to love and be loved in First Nations' ways was further attacked and torn apart by coalitions of government and Christian institutions through residential schools that attempted to destroy language, spirituality, family and community. For children raised in this situation, it has taken superhuman effort to just barely recover from this abuse. Sometimes the effects lasted for generations. Many did not recover at all—fatally. Many adopted First Nations children were raised in very loving

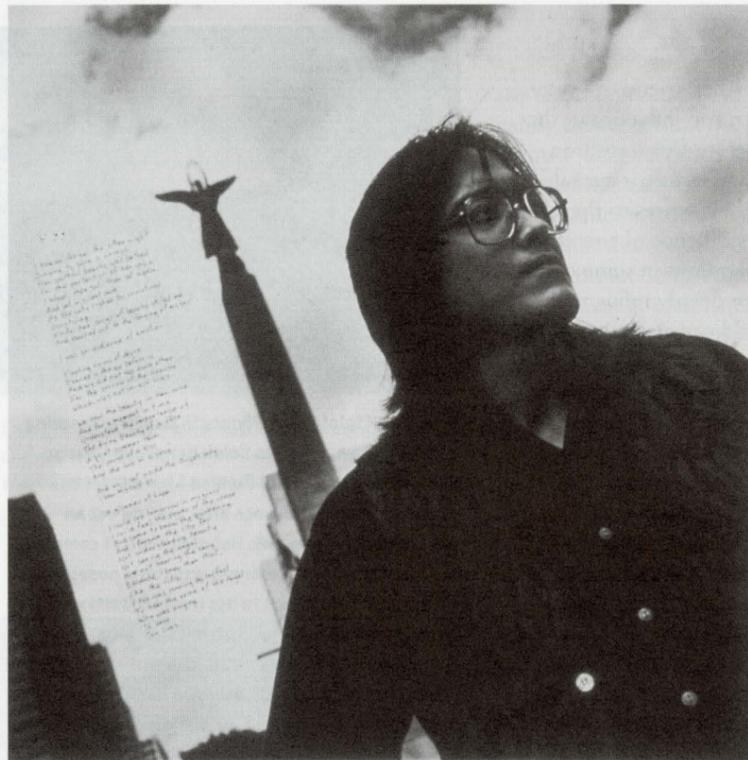


True, Marti totaled the Plymouth Duster one spring night in 1970 and had to finish her senior year in Oklahoma. And I nearly flunked high school and managed suspension once after putting out an underground newspaper. But please don't compare our intermittent recklessness and rebel poses to our little sister Diane. Next to her me and Marti were about as unconventional as bank vice-presidents in Nebraska. Diane scared us all to death with a fierce campaign whose agenda only she knew. No school could hold her — she tore through them from Shaker Heights to Santa Fe, leaving her keepers blinking and confused. Diane never felt sorry for herself and always had this amazing smile for nearly everyone. (Marti and I practiced moodiness learned from bad movies and magazines.)

Now she is perhaps the best waitress in Houston, and last night she told me about the ghost dance shirts she and Jake make. The shirts are decorated with the sun and the moon, and a man in Louisiana who works on the oil rigs buys them sometimes. The phone line is perfect, as if she's in Baltimore instead of Texas, and I remember for a moment how when we were kids in Maryland we had a party line and wonder if anyone has party lines anymore. Diane explains the ghost dance is about the love of the earth and the buffalo, and "you know everything I make is with all the love in my heart."

She says this in a manner so unaffected it takes my cynical breath away, and for a few seconds I fight back the tears. Ashamed, I remember how I used to worry so much about Diane, always thinking of Joni Mitchell's friend who was forever breaking like waves at Malibu, but now I feel very small before my little sister's magnificent and mysterious strength, wondering where the hell did it come from? and there's a pause for a second and then she's saying they are planning a trip East in the spring, do I know any good shows?

— Paul Chaat Smith, from his collaboration with Diane Chaat Smith.



Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew is a Cree-Métis from northern Alberta who has developed a practice in performance art, video and writing. He has also been working as an arts administrator for First Nations artists, primarily in artist-run culture, for the past seven years. He is currently working on an interactive multi-media screenplay collaboration on the World Wide Web for production as a CD-ROM. His personal home page is at: <http://spider.regina.ism.ca/ism/artists/ahasiw/index.htm>

Notes

1. Canada. *A Descriptive Poem, Written at Quebec, 1805 With Satires—Imitations—and Sonnets* ([Quebec] John Neilson, n.d.), p. 7. Quoted by D. M. R. Bently in his article "Savage, Degenerate, and Dispossessed: Some Sociological, Anthropological, and Legal Backgrounds to the Depiction of Native Peoples in Early Long Poems on Canada" published in *Native*

the nineteenth century and well into our own times.¹⁵

The "Native Love" exhibition is an important attempt in what I hope will be a continuing and increasing concentration on the love, First Nations-style, that is our true strength. This exhibition does not represent the emergence of this topic in First Nations culture. It endeavours to provide an entryway into Western cultural and art historic consciousness for First Nations artists who bear witness to the contemporary power of First Nations love in the living, in ancient voices of the land, non-human loves and lovers, in the ones who have left the physical world but who still speak the strength of family, community and friendship, and especially for those who are coming into being now and in the future. It is a celebration of our own love medicines.

This exhibition also makes an important contribution to contemporary artist-run dialogue about issues of "traditional" vs. "contemporary" art—issues that were initially used by white arts professionals and institutions to exoticize and exclude First Nations forms of expression that did not incorporate western contemporary art media or concepts. This strategy closely followed theories of scientific racism, but in a way that even those who carried out and supported this exclusion were not fully aware of the deeper implications of their actions. Such is the subversive and dangerous nature of the notion of Quality in the arts, which is based on the mistaken belief that it transcends boundaries when in fact it creates more of them. Without a rich understanding of First Nations cultures, and lacking the ability to do the often difficult translations across non-European cultural differences, arts professionals in power enforced a normative definition of Real Art that

white families who provided them with everything a white child needed to grow into a healthy white person. Why have so many of them killed themselves—slowly, in some cases, or with instant acts of violence in others? Grief, hopelessness and the ensuing rage still hover around the edges and continues to kill and maim from within.

Suicide, violence, spousal and child abuse, fatal addictions, gang warfare and corrosive internalized racism are the legacy First Nations people have been given from the still-reigning heroism in Canadian culture of people like Alexander Mackenzie, who continue to be celebrated in the dominant versions of Canadian history. The publication of his descriptions of his explorations in 1801 were an important and lasting contribution to "theories of 'scientific racism,' which declared the Indians, with indigenous peoples all over the globe, to be both culturally and biologically an inferior species. Many thinkers challenged them, but in Canada, as elsewhere, they formed the politically operative point of view on native peoples throughout the

Above: *Portrait of a Poet as a Proud Young Man*, Arthur Renwick and Burton Amos, 1995, B&W photograph, 40.6x40.6 cm.

amounted to ethnocentric censorship. In writing about these issues, Lucy Lippard comments:

According to this lofty view, racism has nothing to do with art; Quality will prevail, so-called minorities just haven't got it yet. The notion of Quality has been the most effective bludgeon on the side of homogeneity in the modernist and postmodernist periods, despite twenty-five years of attempted revisionism. The conventional notion of good taste with which many of us were raised and educated was based on an illusion of social order that is no longer possible (or desirable) to believe in. We now look at art within the context of disorder—a far more difficult task than following institutionalized regulations. Time and again, artists of color and women determined to revise the notion of Quality into something more open, with more integrity, have been fended off from the mainstream strongholds by this garlic-and-cross strategy.

She goes on to quote African American artist Adrian Piper:

Cultural racism is damaging and virulent because it hits its victims in particularly vulnerable and private places; their preferences, tastes, modes of self-expression, and self-image.... When cultural racism succeeds in making its victims suppress, denigrate, or reject these means of cultural self-affirmation [the solace people find in entertainment, self-expression, intimacy, mutual support, and cultural solidarity], it makes its victims hate themselves.¹⁶

The "Native Love" exhibition is the child of a new generation that believes in the success of all these years of struggling to be fully heard and felt. Many of the works in this exhibition confidently incorporate First Nations forms of art practice with English texts in a powerful combination that reveals the rich significance of First Nations expression. Objects and techniques that were previously relegated to craft shops and museum dioramas of First Nations material culture are given the opportunity to display their full intensity as sources of complex meaning—even though, again, First Nations artists have had to be the ones to do the translations across these lines of cultural difference. Another important aspect of the show is that the works that do not incorporate First Nations materials or techniques directly, fit beside the others in a firm and comfortable way. Each manner of working fully supports and enriches the other, the collaborations extending outward from the individual pieces weave their unique voices into a unified whole around the theme of "Native Love."

The Saskatoon version of this exhibition was co-hosted and co-sponsored by Tribe, A Centre for Evolving Aboriginal Media, Visual and Performing Art, Inc. and AKA Artists' Centre. This exhibition was made possible with the support of Circle Vision Arts Corporation, the Canada Council, Saskatchewan Arts Board, Saskatchewan Lotteries and generous volunteers. My sincere apologies that, within this limited space, not all artists could be quoted or the individual works more fully described. This exhibition is certainly deserving of a much more in-depth investigation.

Photos courtesy of Nation to Nation and AKA Artists' Centre.

Writers and Canadian Writing, edited by W. H. New, (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1990) p. 79.

2. Alexander Mackenzie, *Voyages from Montreal on the River St. Lawrence, through the Continent of North America to the Frozen and Pacific Oceans*, London, 1801. Quoted by Parker Duchemin in his article "'A Parcel of Whelps': Alexander Mackenzie among the Indians," *Native Writers and Canadian Writing*, p. 67.

3. Quoted by Ted Ferguson, "Native Son," *Imperial Oil Review*, 73.395 (Winter, 1989), 18, 20. Quoted by Denis W. Johnston in his article "Lines and Circles: The 'Rez' Plays of Thomson Highway," published in *Native Writers and Canadian Writing*, p. 259.

4. Arthur Kroker and David Cook, *The Postmodern Scene: Excremental Culture and Hyper-Aesthetics*, (Montreal: New World Perspectives, 1986) p. 23.

5. Robert Lapsley and Michael Westlake, *Film Theory: An Introduction*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988) pp. 32-66.

6. Rodney Sappington and Tyler Stallings, eds., *Uncontrollable Bodies: Testimonies of Identity and Culture* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1994).

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16.

8. Rigoberta Menchu, *I... Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, ed. Elisabeth Burgos-De Bray (London: Verso, 1984), p. 20, 247.

9. Lucy R. Lippard, *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990), pp. 48-49.

10. Walter L. Williams, *The Spirit and the Flesh: Sexual Diversity in American Indian Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), p. 30.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

13. Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), p. 69. Quoted in Lucy R. Lippard, *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990), p. 109.

14. "Ni' Go Tlunh A Doh Ka," exhibition catalogue, Old Westbury N.Y.: Amalie A. Wallace Gallery, State University of N.Y. College at Old Westbury/Boston: North Hall Gallery, Massachusetts College of Art, 1986. Curated, with texts by Jan Fisher and Jimmie Durham, artists' statements.

15. Alexander Mackenzie, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

16. Lucy R. Lippard, *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990), p. 7. Adrian Piper quoted from "Ways of Averting One's Gaze," 1987 (unpublished).

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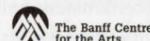
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BERLINALE 1996

Kanada in Berlin: Cultural Difference and the Function of the Festival

FEBRUARY 15-26, 1996

REVIEW BY ROBIN CURTISS

"Chinese Chocolate, *Kanada*, Regie Yan Cui, Qi Chang. Mit Diana Peng, Shirley Cui, Bo Z. Wang. 99 Min., dt. Untertitel. Was soll ich mir darunter vorstellen, chinesische Schokolade aus Kanada?" This objection raised in the alternative daily paper *Die Tageszeitung* (actually about the dearth of information in the festival catalogue) reveals a good deal about the reception of Canadian films in Germany: "what is this supposed to mean, anyway? Chinese chocolate from Canada?" The existence of diasporic culture seems to often be beyond the ken of most Germans, including the organizers of the festival. Indeed, it was not uncommon in the "Canadian boom" atmosphere of the Berlinale 1995 to find, for example, both Mina Shum's *Double Happiness* and Kal Ng's *The Soul Investigator* referred to by media and public alike as "Chinese" films.

For the past six years I have observed the reception given to Canadian films at the Berlin Film Festival. Ostensibly, Germany provides one of the most lucrative of foreign markets for Canadian feature films; however it is impossible to discuss the reception of "Canadian" films in this foreign context without addressing the fact that no one in the foreign audience (including the programmers of festivals) may choose to perceive the films in question as representatives of Canadian culture. What are the implications of naming a certain group of films "Canadian?" Is it possible to discuss films in this manner without implying an essentialist identity at the core of the work? Do they really "love us in Berlin?"

While the concept of a national cinema is often cited when it comes to the performance of "Canada" at a foreign festival, it is seldom held up to scrutiny. What is the attraction that a certain group of films hold for programmers? Are films even seen as representative of a certain culture? If so, of which culture and for which reasons? As the key determinant when establishing a film's official national identity is the source of the funding, there can be no unproblematic acceptance of the official label as definitive. Paul Willeman describes a cinema of national specificity as one

"which consciously and directly works with and addresses the materials at work within the national cultural constellation. The issue of national cinema is then primarily a question of address rather than a matter of the filmmakers' citizenship or even of the production finance's country of origin." Accordingly, the viewing of "National Cinema" cannot be divorced from the perceptual specificity of one's own cultural identity. Willeman adds, "it is

not simply a matter of engaging in a dialogue with some other culture's products, but of using one's understanding of another cultural practice to re-perceive and rethink one's own cultural constellation at the same time."



Still from *Chinese Chocolate*, Yan Cui and Qi Chang, 1995, 35mm, 95 min., English & Mandarin (E.s.t.).

In addition it must be noted that film programmers and filmmakers have very different agendas. A foreign festival promises a kind of prestige that is particularly well-suited to manipulation for marketing purposes at home. The process of translation offers an opportunity for filmmakers and film curators alike to make what they will of the situation, for example, allowing the translation the "Wolfgang Staudte Award,"

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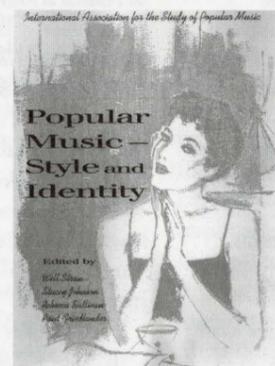


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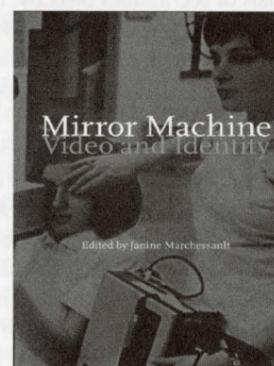
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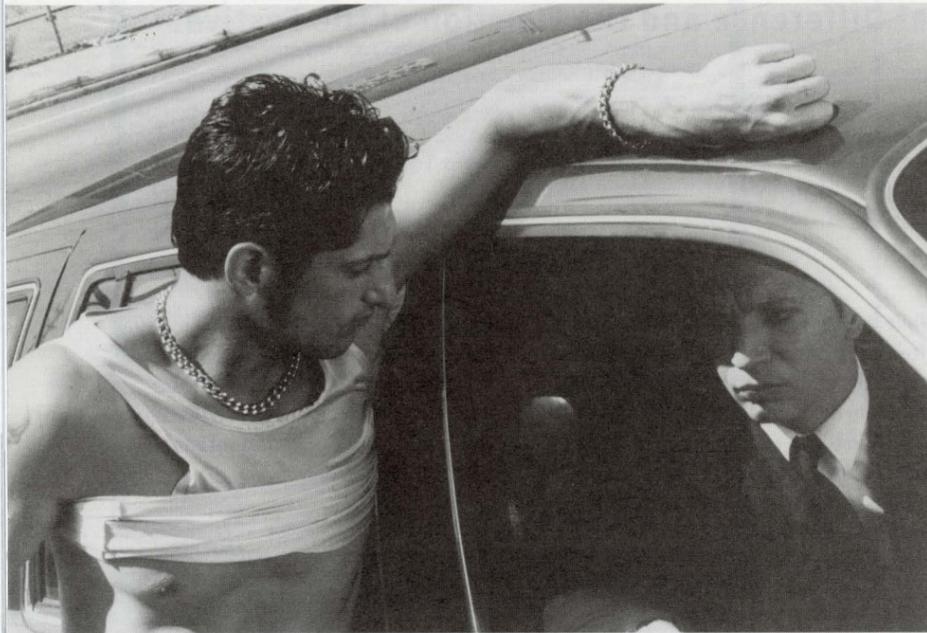
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Production still from *Hustler White*, Bruce La Bruce and Rick Castro, 1995, 16mm. Distribution: Strand Releasing.

which is one of approximately fifty awards offered at the festival into "the prize at the Berlin Film Festival for best first film."

Programmers on the other hand, are assigned the task of supporting the interests of the film industry while creating the perception of having accurately represented "the world" for the home audience. What is seldom mentioned about the Berlin Film Festival is that it is in fact two festivals in one, with each particular section distinguished by very different objectives. The portion that includes the "Official Competition" and the "Panorama" program is called the "Internationale Filmfestspiele Berlin." The Competition is dominated primarily by Hollywood films and the prestige productions from other countries. The Panorama section focuses on less commercial productions, but has most importantly become known as one of the prime springboards internationally for gay and

lesbian film. Five Canadian films were invited this year to participate in the Panorama section. The mandate of the second festival, the "International Forum of Young Film," is the presentation of formally challenging work by young filmmakers. No Canadian films were selected this year for the Forum section.

Now, there are a few things that are surprising about the selection process in this section. One of the Panorama's two programmers, Margaret von Schiller, stated in her introduction to the initial short film program, and later in conversation, that the criterion for the selection of the shorts is not quality but thematic compatibility. Vancouver-based film curator Claudia Morgado Escanilla's short film *Unbound* was chosen according to Schiller for its compatibility thematically and temporally with the American feature documentary, *Paris Was a Woman*. Moreover Schiller said that she did not consider *Unbound* a Canadian film but rather a "Spanish" one,

particularly since the cost of subtitling was covered by Spanish sources. Yet seeing the film in the midst of a German audience I couldn't help but think that it played into the hands of the standard German preconception about North Americans and their prudish relationship to the body. In a series of tableaux, staged to imply or mimic the spatial and political constraints of art history, fifteen women speak "candidly" about their relationship to their breasts. While the (under-)rehearsed texts speak of liberation and sensuality, the uncomfortable performances of the women and the staging choices made by the filmmaker focus attention on the intrusiveness of camera and the film's own objectives with respect to its subjects. The structural repetition of the verbal biographical and then physical revelations becomes compulsive.

Significantly, the last woman to present herself emerges from the shadows at the rear of the stage, speaks briefly of her experience of sexual abuse and why, for that reason, she now "lives her [sensual] life through her breasts." At this point she opens her blouse, then steps quickly and somewhat ashamedly back into the shadows. Superficially a challenge to historical appropriations of the female body, *Unbound* rehearses various representations of "the natural" that again take the form of projections onto women's bodies. The film was awarded the Teddy (the Gay and Lesbian Film Award) for the best short film.

The feature-length *Chinese Chocolate* was another prize winner, receiving one of two International Confederation of Art Cinemas Awards. It was the only Canadian film to be reviewed in German papers this year, not surprisingly since it was the subject of prolonged heated debate at each of its screenings. The title of the review reflects one of the contentious issues in the Q&A sessions: "When men are pigs...women become lesbians?" The ubiquitous film still, which



Stills from *Jim Loves Jack: The James Egan Story*, David Adkin, 1995, video, 53 min. Distribution: V Tape. Photo credit: Ali Kazimi.

features two reclining naked women, provoked a great deal of displeasure in the largely female audience when it became apparent that a particularly ostentatious heterosexuality actually featured prominently in this film. It was in fact exactly for this reason that Schiller programmed the feature, it being the first time she had seen an open depiction of sexuality in a "Chinese" film. The story traces the progress of two women who happen to arrive in Canada from China on the same plane and become involved with various men in order to get by (without even once giving them the opportunity to express a mutual attraction, despite the promise inherent structurally in their repeated proximity.) While the film insists on its geographical rootedness in a Toronto skyline, it refers several times to the need for a "green card." Thus it hovers uneasily on the edge of a series of identities, refusing to commit itself. Filmic address is in this case marked by a disquiet that is not always as productive as it could have been in view of its real affinity to the film's subject matter.

Interestingly, the two remaining Canadian films, *Anatomy of Desire*, an NFB treatment of the political ramifications of the search for a biological source for homosexuality, and the charming *Jim Loves Jack: The James Egan Story*, which were programmed together, were not seen in the context of any national culture at all, although *Jim Loves Jack* very specifically addresses the struggle for same-sex pension benefits in Canada. Both are relatively straightforward but engaging documentaries, that, according to Schiller, were selected primarily because it is still very necessary that the information that they disseminate reach an audience. However, the charm of the latter film, which makes use of some great archival footage, lies to a great extent in the specificity of the depiction of a fifty-year relationship lived out in several Canadian cities and towns.

Robin Curtiss is a Berlin-based filmmaker and writer, who teaches film at the Freie Universität Berlin. She is curating a series of Canadian films to be screened at Kino Arsenal this summer in Berlin and will dare to broach the subject of "Kanada" with the German audience.

Notes

1. Michael Rutschky, "Berlinale Anthropologie: Die Verdrängung des Schauens durch das Lesen," *Die Tageszeitung*, no. 4855 (21 February 1996), p. 25.
2. Bruce La Bruce's latest film, *Hustler White*, is listed in the Panorama program as a German/Canadian production but, unlike the other Canadian films at the festival, received neither promotional nor financial (ie. travel grant) support from Telefilm Canada. The issue of its "nationality" was not raised in public in Berlin.
3. Paul Willeman, "The National," *Looks and Frictions: Essays in Cultural Studies and Film Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 212.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 214.
5. Elmar Thinkow, "Wenn Männer eklig werden... werden Frauen lesbisch?," *Die Tageszeitung*, no. 4857 (23 February 1996), p. 26.
6. The other bone of contention during the Q&A focused on another area of identity politics introduced by Chinese immigrants (to various countries) who felt the film grossly misrepresented their own various experiences.

CATHY SISLER'S SPIN CYCLES

La Femme Écran / The Reflexive woman

CURATED BY NICOLE GINGRAS

OBORO, MONTREAL, APRIL 13–MAY 19, 1996

REVIEW BY ANNE GOLDEN

I wonder if there is something inside of us that spins. Extreme states of psychosis have been described in terms of everything starting to move, to spin. In illness, this pull is entropic and, eventually, it seems as if all the particles of the body break apart and scatter into space. This then is not a sucking in, a pull of everything toward a central core but a breaking apart, a centrifugal force. And there is no cohesion or centre.

—Cathy Sisler, *Aberrant Motion #1*

Montreal-based artist Cathy Sisler has crossdressed as businessman Mr. B. out for a slo-mo stroll, has constructed a building-like “spinning structure” and worn it as The Spinning Woman. The staging of her self(ves) is in constant evolution. The personas appear in a series of videos the prolific Sisler has been producing since 1992. In a relentless pursuit of space to inhabit and alter, Sisler has set her tapes in a train station, busy downtown streets, vacant lots and an overpass. She’s a one-woman band who has a show at Oboro that confirms the importance of her videos and fills the gallery space with her incredible art works. The exhibition “*La Femme Écran/The Reflexive Woman*” is the product of an intensive collaboration and cross-pollination of ideas between curator Nicole Gingras and artist Sisler. Gingras wishes to highlight the fact that, while Sisler is best known for her one-channel tapes, she works in a variety of media. The show is characterized by Gingras as “a whole environment in which the presentation of Cathy’s tapes are a component.” “*La Femme Écran/The Reflexive Woman*” includes sculptures, a

sound installation, drawings, objects, ten videos grouped into three programs and a performance.

A large papier-mâché sculpture greets viewers as they enter the gallery. Deep red and covered in drawings, diagrams and bits of text, the five-foot sculpture resembles an elongated spinning top/person. A second sculpture duplicates the first in height, colour and the use of drawings and text, but it is as if the centre has come undone and is flying out in a sail-like section. A recurring image that Sisler scatters throughout the show is a miniature representation of herself as a kind of angel/insect/bumblebee. This ambiguous winged image of herself figures in two installations, one that spins like a wind-up music box ballerina in front of a home-movie screen, the other inlaid into a dinette set. If the artist isn’t spinning or putting a spin on everyday things, she represents herself as a being in the process of transforming. Another installation is built around a monitor on which we see Sisler’s face transformed by computer animation into a slick surface. In front of the screen is a record turntable with a microphone spinning on it. As it turns, the microphone hits a mask of Sisler’s face, mounted on a stick and taped to the front of the turntable. Sisler’s collages of appliances and images of herself are a homebrew of low technology that displays its simple construction techniques proudly.

Her installations include so many household objects that Oboro has taken on the feeling of a madcap apartment. The video viewing stations in “*La Femme Écran/The*



Sculpture included in *La Femme Écran*, Oboro, 1996.
Photo: Denis Farley

Reflexive Woman” are replicas of home environments. In one den-like area, viewers can sink into a comfortable sofa, slip on earphones and operate the remote themselves. This is where *Aberrant Motion #1*, the tape that introduces *The Spinning Woman*, can be screened. In a separate room in the gallery, Sisler has installed a kitchen table covered with fake wood grain mactac cutouts of her winged self, making ghost-like faces and figures rise out of a familiar piece of furniture. A week after the show opened, a new object appeared in this “kitchen” installation: a transformed *TV Guide*, with Sisler’s face pasted in place of one of the Beverly Hills 90210 cast members, which can be consulted for Sisler’s video program.

Watching Sisler’s videos in order of production is to watch an artist adopting, discarding and orchestrating a mutation of personae, even as she learns and masters video technology. *Aberrant Motion #1* (1993), *Aberrant Motion #2* (1993) and *Aberrant Motion #3* (1993) were all edited from a Video 8 camera using a VHS recorder. Whirling on busy street corners and in front of a woman seated behind an office desk, Sisler goes public in *Aberrant Motion #1*. “The spinning is an insistence of self amongst others without conformity.” The last shot of the tape is of Sisler in full spin, slowing to a full stop and then looking directly into the camera. This represents a rare image of stillness. There is an urgency to these tapes as Sisler navigates through them, spinning, walking, dodging, disguised in a suit or in a wooden structure. Her tapes are as resolutely low-tech as her installations and in keeping with her means of production.

In *Aberrant Public Speaking* (1994), the montage is complex, a building cacophony and chaos. This tape combines images of Sisler holding an umbrella and screaming, performances of her wearing a white dress on street corners, excerpts from an Oprah Winfrey show on people who don’t

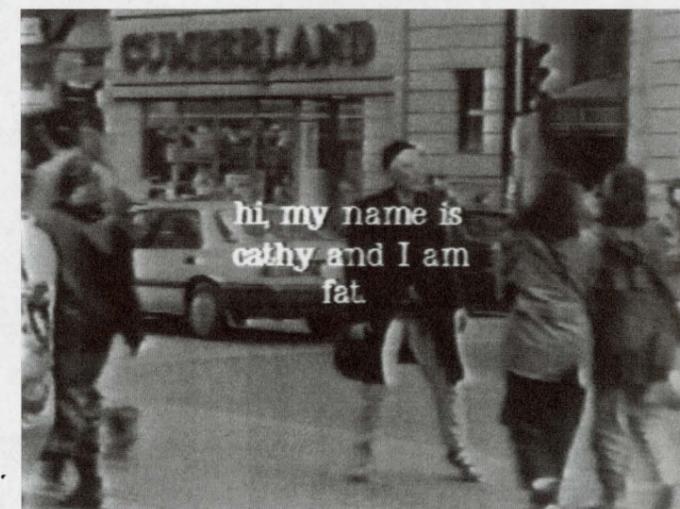
like their voices and a speech the artist attempts to deliver on a busy overpass. “Believe me when I say to you my friends that I respect the speed with which you wish to pass me by.” Her oration begins well enough, but Sisler quickly positions herself as an outsider, unwilling to adhere to the tenets of public speaking. As cars whizz by behind her, she is all but drowned out. The absurdity of the situation and the environment underscore *The Spinning Woman*’s dogged determination to fit in while sticking out.

In and among all of this flying apart at the seams, Sisler employs music that connects many of her tapes to the campiest of performance genres, the musical comedy. Ethel Merman’s *There’s No Business Like Show Business* blasts its way through first half of *Aberrant Motion #4*—*face story/stagger stories* with music in the second half composed and played by Sisler herself. A cheesy organ rendition of *Hopelessly Devoted to You* from *Grease* punctuates the end of *The Better Me*. It is also possible to see her tapes as a wacky alternative TV show that borrows from the medium but is too unwieldy for it. Sisler makes regular use of recurring characters, an infomercial format and skewed woman-in-the-street bits.



Still from *Aberrant Public Speaking*, 1994, video, 18 min.
Distribution: Groupe Intervention Vidéo.

Theory and quotations abound in her work, but the result is never dry. In *Aberrant Motion #2*, Sisler wears the wooden structure that resembles a building and narrates: “She thought to herself, ‘Yeah, I want to be a team player.’” The structure is a protection and an oddity. *The Better Me* is an infomercial with a twist that includes references to the phenomenon of phantom limbs and links this to the artist’s creation



Still from *Aberrant Motion #4: Face Story/Stagger Series*, 1994, video, 14 min.
Distribution: Groupe Intervention Vidéo.

"STRAIGHT UP" AND THE POLITICS OF BOREDOM

Straight Up

CBC TELEVISION, MONDAYS, FEBRUARY 19—MARCH 25, 1996

CO-PRODUCED BY ALLIANCE COMMUNICATIONS AND BACK ALLEY FILM PRODUCTIONS LTD.

REVIEW BY SCOTT TRELEAVEN

Boredom is always counter-revolutionary.
—Situationist slogan

One true youth tale: I was discussing the new dramatic CBC television series "Straight Up" with a few friends, asking their opinions. One of the people present was the mother of a seventeen-year-old boy. She had watched an episode because it was reputed to be an accurate portrayal of "what kids are into these days." She was duly mortified by the show, and asked me if what she'd seen was gospel. I replied, "Sometimes."

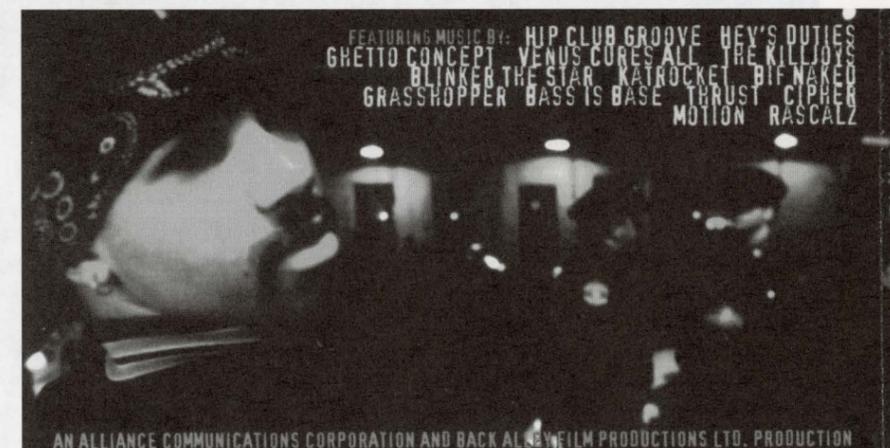
Janis Lundman and Adrienne Mitchell, of *Talk 16/Talk 19* notoriety, have created this new youth-oriented series for the CBC. Like Lundman and Mitchell's previous works, the title evokes a series that deals candidly with the lives of Toronto teens and twenty somethings. Even the clever advertising campaign in *NOW Magazine's* personals section seems to attest to the authenticity of the show's characters. It's possible that the scripts might actually have been taken from real-life tales of alienated teens in the nineties—the children left behind after the messy divorce of style and substance. The show revels in the supposed wake of post-punk "alternative" culture, all the posing without the convictions, leftovers from Cobain's suicide (the most thorough sort of integrity, since Joy Division anyway) with all the glamour of an inner-city drive-by shooting.

I know I believe in nothing, but it is my nothing.¹

"Straight Up"'s intro credits are over-

exposed, MTV slick: the lead characters twitch with single-frame potential offering curt introductions to persona that recur, but are never allowed to fully develop. The kids appear indifferent to everything, whether its a car window shot out in front of them, a fist fight with a close friend or the droves of police on

feminism, no punks,² no queers.³ No iconoclasts. NO ANGER. Maybe "Straight Up" wants to be a gentler *Kids*. But the fundamental questions remain: Why is the CBC courting the bored and disenfranchised? Why bother telling these stories at all?



Portion of music CD of soundtrack distributed by Alliance Communications.

every corner. "Straight Up" seems to want to avoid hackneyed, Degrassi-ish politically correct trauma (for instance, the characters are allowed to say things like "blow your wad"), yet the show focuses on a sector of youth culture that has no identity whatsoever, and just isn't looking for one. Most of the characters have money to spend on a little bit of dope, a little bit of booze, still live at home and feign escapist, pseudo-intellectual conversations. There's no pretence of activism, no (conspicuous) racism, no

We are experiencing or will soon experience the perfection of the societal. The heavens have come down to earth. We sense the fatal taste of material paradise. It drives one to despair, but what should one do? *No future.*⁴

The show's edge seems to come from its unconventional camera work. A world that has forfeited real confrontation can easily be glamourized and sold by a music-video approach. The dynamic is meaninglessly technical rather than

of Sisler-satellites. The building/outfit of *Aberrant Motion # 2* has evolved into a lifeless wooden Cathy twin for a viciously funny parody of self-improvement and the illusion of togetherness. Sisler plays, among other characters, an infomercial host who doesn't look or sound like any other. The word "dyke" is scrawled across a scanned photograph of Sisler. Even out-takes make it into the normally slick infomercial format. The artist's personae in *The Better Me* are too self-aware to offer soothing slogans. "In this postmodern age of hustle and bustle, it is possible to invent someone who will be with us all our lives." The combination of peppy spokespeople and affirmations sold on late night tv is

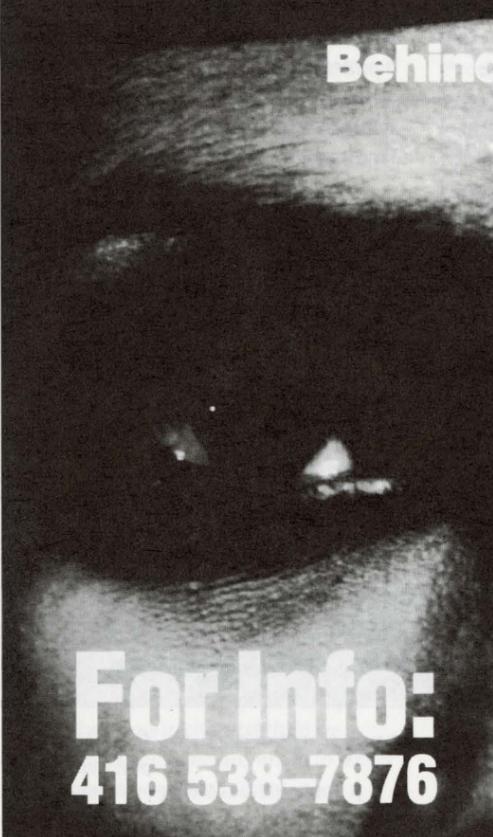
thwarted by someone who invents a doppelgänger.

Aberrant Motion #4—face story/stagger stories marks the first time Sisler makes use of a Video Toaster. In perhaps her best-known tape, Sisler lean-walks, dodge-walks and spin-walks. A male pedestrian becomes her unwitting human satellite; another body answers her own movements. On one level, Sisler's tapes are about measuring a body that can't be pinned down, even as she constantly identifies parts of herself. "Hi, my name is Cathy and I am inconsistent. Hi, my name is Cathy and I'm a lesbian." Sisler's stories are told in shots of long duration, often slowed down

so we can appreciate the minute details of her exhilarating trajectories.

"*La Femme Écran/The Reflexive Woman*" is an exhibition rich with details of invented homes and renewable selves. The three tape programs will go on to be screened at YYZ Artists' Outlet (May 22–June 22) and the entire Oboro exhibition will travel to the Western Front (November 15–December 15) and the Centre d'Art Contemporain de Basse-Normandie (Winter 1997).

Anne Golden is co-director of *Groupe Intervention Video (GIV)*, a videomaker and curator living in Montreal.



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Production still for "Straight Up," television series created by Adrienne Mitchell and Janis Lundman.

organic or script-driven. For instance, the flagging vigour of one episode's euchre game is boosted by using freeze frames. (The euchre match is a metaphor for losing a friendship, for those who wondered.) All the Super-8 and over-exposed shots imply that we're watching something cool, something *worthy* of embellishment, not starving for it.

I should also mention "Straight Up"'s treatment of three particular outcasts in the show: a Goth (a new wave vampire), a would-be gangsta rapper (Raiders jacket and all) and a street kid who's forever lingering in the background. These characters represent *actual* subcultures, each with huge youth contingents surrounding them. But the characters are treated so dispassionately, they never reveal the details of what draws them to their particular style, in fact, they always appear alone. If you're different you'll be lonely? The Goths (I'm an ex-Goth myself), rappers and street kids that I know are all pack ani-

mals. "Straight Up" seems bent on portraying them as just as unremarkable as the other characters. Oddly enough, the episode with the faux-gangsta rapper ended with a nicely charged, but passive, confrontation with the police in which he offered them his Raiders jacket, an act that could be read as handing his identity over to the state. Although he did it to show that he wasn't really a bad-ass, just a kid in a costume, it seemed more like an inverted martyrdom—No, no, I was only kidding! See, I'm directionless, too.... None of his friends seemed to care much, either.

"Straight Up" also reinvents "Toronto the Good" as "Toronto the Gun-rife Police State." It's just part of the ugly trend to make this city out to be far more interesting than it is; to try to turn Toronto into New York. Just like the camera effects, the guns and police cars in nearly every episode are surrogate hype to the apathetic chic of the youth culture "Straight Up" wants to capture.

Worse still, by portraying the too-fucking-cool kids as part of this scenario, real teens from the all-too-real suburbs trickle into the city looking for these gunfights and pointless police clashes. If they don't find them, they'll invent them. Validating the existence of this attitude (yes, moms, it exists all right) while dressing it up with music-video montage and pop-verity, "Straight Up" perpetuates its false economy of authenticity and mimicry.

I imagine I'll wait in vain for an episode where one of the characters puts a brick through a window at Queen's Park, or when one of them joins Anti-Racist Action, or when someone, anyone, gets tired enough to change the world around them. As the New York Dolls asked: "What are the politics of Boredom?" For some reason, the CBC is determined to find out; there are rumours that "Straight Up" is being renewed for next season. Why is it that the reality of youth struggle in this era has come to centre around the most indolent kids?

The maximum in intensity lies behind us; the minimum in passion and intellectual inspiration lie before us.⁵

This is state tv.

Scott Treleaven is a Toronto writer and filmmaker, and a recent graduate of the Ontario College of Art. He is currently engaged in the making of a *QueerPunk-u-mentary*, and the publication of his zine *This is the Salvation Army*.

Notes

1. Manic Street Preachers, from the song *Faster*, 1994.
2. Apolitical goths just aren't punks. Sorry.
3. Hence the programme's title.
4. Jean Baudrillard, "The Anorexic Ruins," from *Looking Back on the End of the World*, eds. Dietmar Kamper and Christoph Wulf (New York: Semiotext(e), 1989), p. 34.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

PASSAGES

Paintings by J.J. Lee

PITT GALLERY, VANCOUVER, FEBRUARY 7–MARCH 6, 1996

REVIEW BY KUAN FOO

A typical painting by a Vancouver-based artist J.J. Lee is a palimpsest of images and patterns; some painted accurately and realistically, some rendered as superimposed outlines that hover over the canvas like ghostly memories, some affixed directly through silk-screen or photocopy transfer. It is especially this final element that leads one to think of Lee's work as not simply paintings but as intricately layered collages in which painting is the central unifying principle.

In "Passage," her recent solo exhibition at Vancouver's Pitt Gallery, Lee uses this multi-layered technique to explore the immigrant experience, specifically her parents' odyssey from Asia to Canada and her own journey as a second-generation Canadian of Chinese ancestry. The five paintings and the installation that make up the exhibition are filled with images that speak of cultural ambiguity and transition. Traditional and "exotic" elements of Chinese imagery exist uneasily within Western art traditions. Family snapshots are silk-screened against large undetailed figure outlines. The head of a Chinese lion dancer rears against a skyline of Canadian mountains. The landscape of the West is constantly encroached upon by the images of the East.

This idea of cultural transition is perfectly captured in Lee's visually arresting "Pattern." On initial viewing, "Pattern" appears to be large and bold depiction of a traditional Chinese tunic. However, a closer look reveals thin white lines cross-

tangible and whole are in fact derived from fragments and instructions passed down from generation to generation. Lee seems to feel that over time and distance these cultural traditions must change to adapt to their surroundings. As her painting suggests, cultures, like garments, are shaped from an initial pattern but re-tailored to fit the individual's circumstance and cut from whatever cloth is available. In cultures as in garments, simply being sewn from a different fabric does not make the final product any less real or valid.

Another painting, *Mandarins*, is a more specific exploration of the nature of Lee's dual heritage. A second-generation Chinese-Canadian who grew up in Halifax, Lee has stated that she and her family were alienated from the local Chinese community

for being in effect "not Chinese enough." Conversely, Lee has also had to come to terms with what many children of immigrants have had to experience; being heir to and identified with a culture that is not theirs by environment. Too often the culture of the immigrant parents becomes viewed as an invasive "other" that has little or no relevance to the child's life. As a



Pattern, 1995-96, oil and collage on canvas, 213 x 244 cm.



Mandarins, 1995-96, oil and photocopy transfer on canvas, 198 x 145 cm.

result, the immigrant culture becomes reduced to its symbols, which seem "alien" and "exotic" with little applicability to the "mundanity" of everyday

outlines of decorative icons drawn from Chinese sources: an intricate picture frame circles the oranges, fruit hangs from a leafy arrangement of boughs, a



Passage, 1995-96, oil and silkscreen on canvas, 170 x 241 cm.

Canadian existence.

With *Mandarins* Lee makes a conscious attempt to reconcile some of the apparent contradictions between her Canadian experience with her Chinese ancestry. The piece contains a collage of images painted in full colour; realistic mandarin oranges, hanging white draperies that may or may not be shirts on a laundry line, power lines stretching into the distance over a series of square-frame poles. Traced over these images are the

fish not found in nature leaps from geometric waves towards two improbably fluffy clouds.

At first, the "flat" and highly stylized Chinese art appears to be floating above the *trompe l'oeil* "depth" of the Western art as though these two different artistic philosophies existed on two separate and mutually exclusive planes. Piercing the illusion, one discovers that in fact, these seemingly disparate elements exist together, the perceived "depth" of the realistic depiction being no more truthful than the "flatness" of the icons. Both are revealed as ways of seeing — as embodiments of ideas.

Still the work probes deeper than the mere act of juxtaposition. Rather than draw literal translations between the iconic Chinese images and their realistic Western counterparts, Lee creates visual analogues between the Chinese icons and objects from her own daily experience. Thus a decorative picture frame becomes a series of receding power poles, a cloud transmutes into the wraith-like hanging shirts, fruit as a symbol of prosperity and longevity becomes mandarin oranges — the tangible fruit. Through this act of transformation, Lee seeks to de-exoticize her Chinese heritage, to make it part of her everyday existence.

Pattern, *Mandarins* and the other six works in "Passage" are clearly the product of an artist making her own personal voyage across a landscape filled with presupposed cultural values. The end of the journey may not yet be in sight but if her work is any indication, J.J. Lee considers the passage every bit as important as the final destination.

Kuan Foo is a Vancouver writer/musician who spends his free time playing *Ultimate*, the fastest-growing team sport in North America. His band, *South of Main*, has just released a three-song demo.

THE AMERICAN HANGOVER

The American Trip

LARRY CLARK, NAN GOLDIN, CADY NOLAND, RICHARD PRINCE

CURATED BY PHILIP MONK

THE POWER PLANT CONTEMPORARY ART GALLERY, TORONTO, FEBRUARY 2—APRIL 8, 1996

REVIEW BY JUDITH DOYLE

The Power Plant's recent exhibition "The American Trip" is a sampling of photography and photo-based sculpture by four New York artists. The lineup includes Larry Clark, Nan Goldin, Cady Noland and Richard Prince; the material has been widely exposed and written about in the States. It is recycled with a resigned, unapologetically morning-after attitude that's as common as a chronic hangover in this town. The rationale for "The American Trip" is probably the Larry Clark phenomenon. He's the celebrity director of the AIDSploitational feature *Kids*, and his portrait style has been replicated in an epidemic of Calvin Klein ads. It's not surprising that some Toronto curator would fetishize Clark's prints, enveloping his images of youth in "the traditional discourse of connoisseurship."¹ The show asks us to consider this group of artists in historic terms, but what is immediately striking about "The American Trip" is its nostalgia for the days when Toronto artists and curators withered in the presence of the New York avant garde. The word "nostalgia" recalls a pertinent Baudrillard quote: "When the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality...a panic-stricken production of the real and the referential."²

On the cover of the exhibition catalogue is a vertically cropped black and white photo by Larry Clark of two naked white kids — a girl, hitting up, and a boy (face and genitals obscured) tying her arm. Alongside this image is a detail from Cady Noland's

OOZEWALD — an oddball sculpture including a larger than life blow-up of a wire service photo of Lee Harvey Oswald imprinted on sheet metal, with big holes in it. A scrunched up U.S. flag-bandanna sticks out of *OOZEWALD*'s nose. The holes are supposedly from bullets, the sculpture evoking a Puritan stockade for the public shaming of criminals, or a photo facade that you stick your head into, like the Mr. Pong's Chinese Food Panda Bear placard on Queen Street West. Actually, the photo-sculpture is more like an arcade-from-hell bean-bag target. The layout of these images — in vertical stripes on a matte-varnished twenty-five dollar a pop oversize catalogue — seems tired, like a gloomy perfume ad with a guilt complex.

Larry Clark's pictures in the exhibit are of nude teens shooting drugs, gang bangs, and rather arty-looking pseudo porn shots of kids faking suicides. The "kids" have a posing, blasé, "whatever" look on their faces that is endearingly inept. The photographs are discreetly sized, printed, framed and installed in a classy, sober institutional style denoting "timeless value." But for me these black-edged floating matte boxes function like cryogenic containment chambers, sealing off the audience from contamination while preserving "the moment," a much-coveted brief bloom of self-conscious coolness when pubescent whores and users



OOZEWALD, Cady Noland, 1989-90, silkscreened ink on aluminum cut-out with flag, 183 x 122 x 0.95 cm. Photo courtesy of the artist.

can cash in on their looks with old rich men. Bass notes are struck in various pictures including a half-naked, very pregnant woman banging up, a child's coffin and a wincing gunshot victim.

For his catalogue text, Philip Monk adopts a dry expository style, without the "theoretic-fictive" flourishes of his "Violence and Representation" essay, which he cannibalizes here. In "Larry Clark: Outlaw Artist," he keeps a straight face when noting, "How appropriate to have an artist in

this exhibition who has led an outlaw existence — not that he came to art as rehabilitation in prison; Clark produced his art while he was on the loose as an outlaw.” After counting the word “outlaw” forty five times in this essay, the connective thread between the works was obvious: at the Power Plant Gallery, “outlaws” are “in-laws” again.

The catalogue reminds us that Clark and Goldin photographed their “communities” of “friends”: “These were (Larry Clark’s) friends, and he wanted to make them appear attractive. That love shows.... (In the ‘Teenage Lust’ series, he documents) the next generation, the younger kids, brothers and sisters of his friends, and their experiences with sex and drugs... the kids that would henceforth be his enduring theme and trademark.” Monk shimmies down the family tree to show that fifty-three year-old art

essay, recalling Warhol of the Studio 54 and “Interview” years.

“The American Trip,” seen through the Larry Clark and Richard Prince material, is really a play of authorities; American art stars on top of a bleary-eyed crop of kid-tricks, crack-dead infants and biker-chicks, passed off as awaiting representational rescue, seen from the vantage point of Toronto as the “new VR” suburbia. The days are invoked when it was still delightfully awkward to be around the raw careerist momentum of artists like Larry Clark, and to watch it play out in their photographs.

Richard Prince’s blurry reprints of “biker chick” snapshots from motorcycle magazines are sometimes collaged with Tom of Finland-type homoerotic drawings, in a way that blandly situates these images on a continuum of white trash. Philip Monk

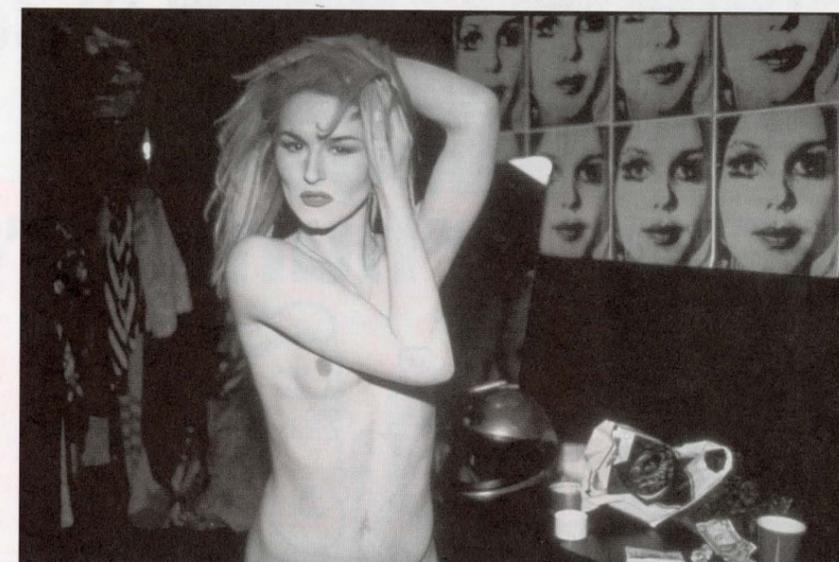
alternative zine-type culture on the Power Plant’s walls. I’d rather see the Toronto queer punk zines, graf zines, dyke zines, etc. that “image” youth, with cross-boundary writing amalgamating personal stories, sex fantasy, music notes, vegan recipes and social critique, all in two-point type, sans copyright clearance.

Cady Noland’s photo-based sculptures were in the back room of the Power Plant, off-line from the rest of the show. She recycles photographs of creepy celebrity-killers like OZEWALD and Charlie Manson, attended by his spaced-out “family” of female hippies, who are lumped together in the catalogue with the biker chicks in “the girls next door” outlaw category. Maybe Charlie Manson is supposed to operate as the super-ego of the show, as an authority stand-in. Monk speculates, “(Noland) selected Manson because he is an outlaw who is both a psychopath and a con man. The con man and psychopath are outsiders who play the game of the insider and seek to control that game to the detriment (and sometimes death) of the other. If the con man declines to operate within society, he still duplicates the corporate model....” The familiar “classic” wire service photos of Manson, Oswald and Patty Hearst elicit a flashback response like “classic” TV shows on CKVR do — more “djà vu” than critique. (Remember the “Star Trek” episode with all the bad guys from history on one team?). The images are mounted on sheet metal to look like printer’s plates, or life-size die-cut figures in video stores. The steel has a modernist sculptural tactility that further depletes the content of the squeezed-dry images. Noland’s sculpture had little impact compared to the straightforward photographs.

In the “Nan Goldin: Sexual Outlaws” section of the catalogue, we are told that “[p]ortraits of subcultures are perhaps most authentic when they are self-representations of communities by artist-

members.” This valorization of “authentic portraits” seems hollow and outdated, though I realize that, like the bell bottom, the old-fashioned lowlife documentary is making something of a comeback. At first, I didn’t think this selection of Nan Goldin photos had much to do with the other material in the show, because the forthcoming, self-assured attitude of the drag queens dismantles the superiority of the photographer and viewers, and is free of the whole “doomed” thing. However, in the catalogue, Philip Monk claims that Goldin’s work “exemplifies the themes of this exhibition: the fascination with the outlaw....” To prove his point, he offensively informs us that the drag queens are, in fact, doomed: “[Nan Goldin’s] style approximates the unselfconsciousness of her subjects — her friends — as they go about partying, living, loving, and for some, as we know in retrospect, soon to be dying.” The curatorial premise for Nan Goldin’s inclusion is based on her celebrity. “Nan Goldin: Sexual Outlaws” completes the catalogue essay and sums up the themes of the exhibition. It begins with a rehash of David Livingstone’s “The Goldin Years” from the fashion section of *The Globe and Mail*, describing her international art shows and the welcome mat laid out for her on Paris runways. Primed with her résumé, Monk asserts that “... artists are responsible for the images and scenarios by which subcultures are popularized. Their own personal celebrity increases the circle of reception, and their cultural authority legitimates identification with hitherto social outcasts.... Such displacement of identification onto the image of the outlaw is always dangerous to society.”

If the curatorial rationale is threatening to the status quo, we don’t get much of a picture of how this danger operates. There are mentions in the catalogue of kids murdering their parents. These crop up with truly Oedipal repetitiveness. Larry



Cody in the Dressing Room at the Boy Bar, NYC, Nan Goldin, 1991.

Clark muses on the topic in a quote reminiscent of the Zen koan on the sound of one hand clapping — “I was thinking about things you couldn’t photograph. How are you going to document a kid killing their parents? How are you going to be there when a kid dies from autoerotic asphyxiation?” Underneath the dangerous outlaw rhetoric, this exhibition reasserts the superlativeness of American artists, the delicious authority of their violence in representation. “The American Trip” returns us to the days when a subject of a photo was just a subject, a trick was just a trick, and every place else was Not New York. It puts “outlaws” in their place, which is to say, poor, sick and capitalizing on every possible asset.

Monk cites the landmark book of photos by Robert Frank called *The Americans*, with an introduction by Jack Kerouac, which has all the octane and emotional warmth this show lacks. In the spirit of nostalgia, I offer this Kerouac quote:

As American as a picture — the faces dont editorialize or criticize or say anything but “This is the way we are in real life and if you dont like it I don’t know anything about it ‘cause I’m living my own life my way and may God bless us all, mebbe” ... plant your prisons in the basin of the Utah moon — nudge Canadian groping

lands that end in Arctic bays, purl your Mexican ribneck, America — we’re going home, going home.³

In a recent episode of the popular TV cop show “Homicide,” the mother of a dead teen and the mother of his murderer share a Baltimore police-station sofa. They chat about moving to Canada, where it snows all the time. There’s an ironic edge to this script of the familiar American rescue fantasy of “Canada,” an irony that was missing when “The American Trip” washed up on the waterfront at the Power Plant. Will the fictional mothers be surprised to find that their old “friend” Larry Clark is waiting for them here?

Judith Doyle is a Toronto writer and filmmaker. She wrote and directed the recent feature film *Wasaga*, and teaches in the Integrated Media program of the Ontario College of Art.

Notes

1. Andy Grundberg, “Photography in the Age of Electronic Simulation,” in *Crisis of the Real: Writings on Photography 1974–1989* (New York: Aperture, 1990).
2. J. Baudrillard, *Simulations*, cited in *An Introductory Guide to Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, John Storey (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1993), p. 165.
3. Robert Frank, *The Americans*, introduction by Jack Kerouac (New York: Grossman, 1969).



Untitled, Larry Clark, 1991. Photo courtesy Lühring Augustine.

star Larry Clark is a great friend of his “trademark” luckless teens. I find this whole line of authorization dated. Such claims of friendship seem fresher in farces about New York social climbers like “Bonfire of the Vanities.” Monk does make several references to Tom Wolfe’s “statuspheres,” but not to “Bonfires” and its elitist New York milieu. In the same vein, there is something nostalgically, sycophantically Margaret Trudeau-esque in the frequency of the word “Warhol” in this

seems unsure what to say about Prince in the catalogue: “I am writing this essay taking a hit from scattered cues in Richard Princes writings and interviews, as if two turntables were playing on either side of me, mixing and blurring sounds and images from another era.” Reissuing the biker reprint series may be an attempt to historicize rave, hip-hop and zine cultures, in terms of Prince’s shallow-end pilfering. I spoke to some people who liked this show because they thought it was fresh and affirming to see some vestige of

the inspired

strange
and
humourous



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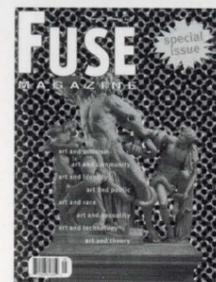
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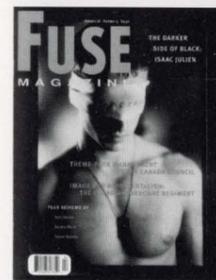
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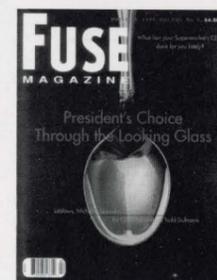
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