

art culture politics

# FUSE

## GOLIATH vs. GOLIATH

Impersonating Captains of Industry, **The Yes Men** rock Big Business boats.



*Also:*

Julian Stallabrass:  
IS ART A LAST  
REFUGE  
FOR RADICAL  
POLITICS?

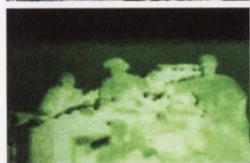
Aaron Cain:  
RIOTS AT  
THE AGO

Heather McLean:  
DANCES IN  
THE BIG BOX  
BALLET

\$7 Volume 32, Number 3



printed in Canada



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Exhibition Continues: April 30<sup>th</sup> - May 30<sup>th</sup>

**Christine Koch**

Exhibition Continues: April 30<sup>th</sup> - May 30<sup>th</sup>

**Open Studios & Solstice BBQ**

June 18<sup>th</sup> at 6pm

**21<sup>st</sup> Annual Member's Show & Sale**

Opening: June 18<sup>th</sup> 6:30pm to 10pm



Photo: Lisa Kannakko

**TESTING THE BOUNDARIES OF EFFECTIVE INTERVENTION**

The surge of interest over the past 20 years in relational and interventionist art practices, set alongside widespread and aestheticized social and economic precarity, raises a number of questions about effective artistic intervention. What is the role of art in relation to the communities it happens in? Many artistic interventions that skirt the surface of social networks – when divorced from the desire for community empowerment and transformation – can actually have the effect of institutionalizing the negative social impacts of a neo-liberalizing society. What responsibilities do artists working in relation to communities have to engage not just with their surface but also with their underlying politics and realities?

In their conversation with Winnipeg filmmaker Noam Gonick, corporate saboteurs The Yes Men reflect on their documentary film *The Yes Men Fix the World*, which has them traveling to New Orleans and Bhopal to draw attention to the need for financial and community reparations. From switching out the voice-boxes of Barbie Dolls before replacing them on store shelves to impersonating the mouthpieces of corporations and governments on the BBC, *The Yes Men* demonstrate how it is possible to intervene in seemingly impenetrable big business spaces to both parody and critique radical corporate agendas. All of these actions, as Gonick notes, are intended to “stir shit up and put cultural producers in the drivers seat in determining our collective future.”

Heather McLean, in *Relational Reflections* from the Big Box Ballet, is wary of the trickle down of sociability from the art world. Drawing connections between the relations that were created and enacted on the picket line of CUPE 3903 and the relational and site specific performances that have become omnipresent in rapidly gentrifying neighborhoods, McLean considers how to stage interventions that

do not steamroll the underlying conditions of communities with “play.” Writing from her gate at York university campus, poised beside a porta potty that has both been kicked over and vandalized with a penis drawing, she reflects on the need for conversations and interventions that illuminate how our lives are connected not only to one another but to broader politics of corporatization, precarity, fragmentation and collective action.

Julian Stallabrass picks this thread up in conversation with Mendel curator Jen Budney, reflecting on the relationship of art to radical politics. Reminding us of a common misconception that simply the presence of non-conforming artspace is in and of itself the achievement of a political goal, Stallabrass warns that the limited freedoms of art can serve as a mask for a variety of servitudes. Stallabrass argues that the art world can be a refuge for all sorts of utopian and idealist notions, among them forms of politics that do not insist too hard on efficacy and power. It can be a refuge, he argues, because no one expects the form or content of art, ensconced in its protected realm, to have an effect on the wider world. “It is the very fact that this enclave exists, rather than what it happens to be occupied with, that serves as the apparent assurance of freedom.”

These statements, of course, are not intended to discourage artists from political or community engagement. Artists do have a long history of creative and effective organizing and intervention. Rather, the intention is to consider the broader impacts of our work in its historical and geographic context, the systems that it ultimately challenges or supports. This, especially in light of the popularity of ironic and corporate models of non-conformity, which position people to consume their own locations and identities as a product that can be bought and sold.

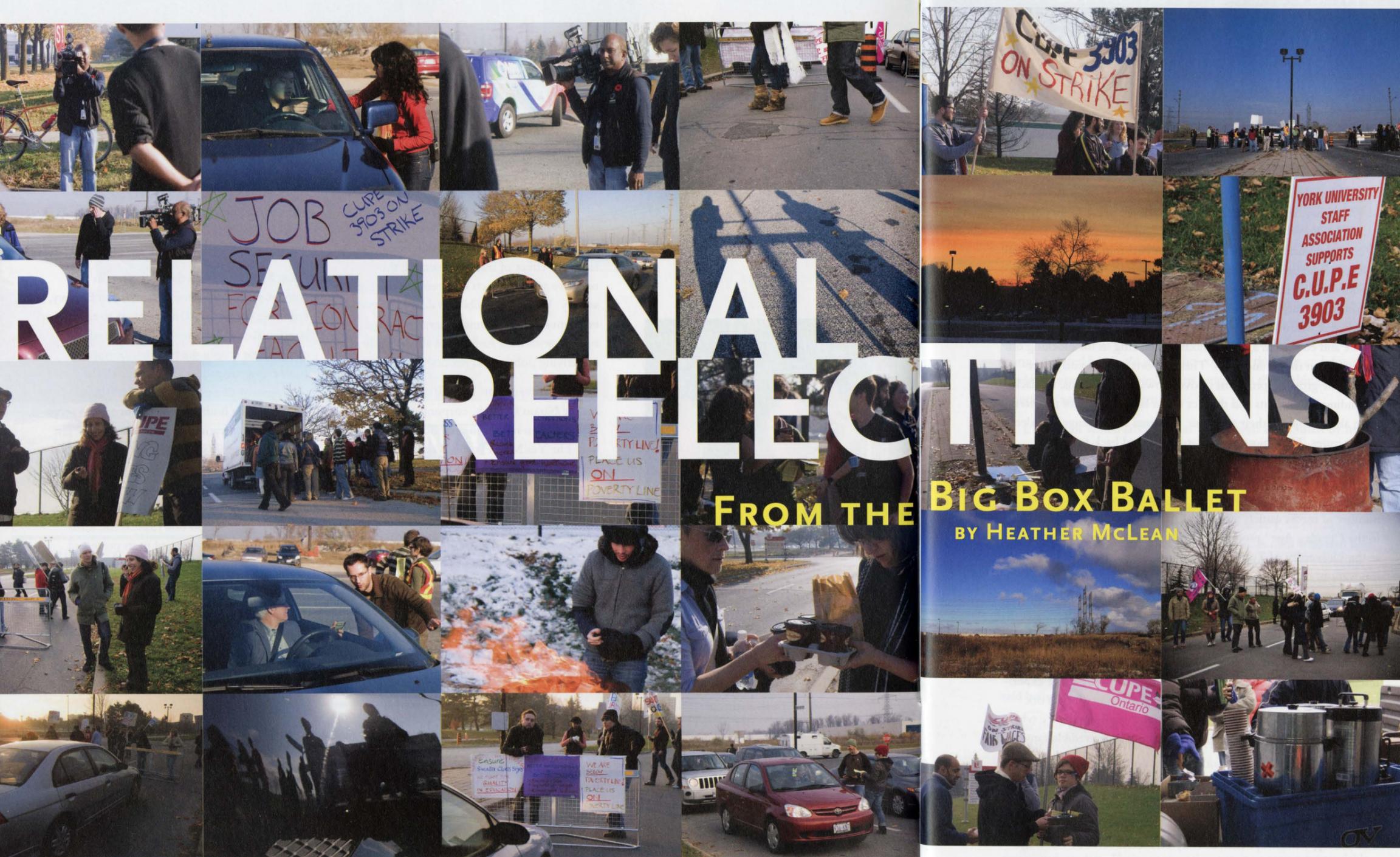
– Izida Zorde



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Photographs taken during York University's CUPE 3903 Strike. Photo: Gavan Watson, 2008.

In her book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jane Jacobs describes everyday, utopic moments of urban interaction as a “sidewalk ballet” where dense, mixed-use neighbourhoods serve as settings that foster the intermingling of people from different backgrounds in dialogue, random encounters and play. Many activists, academics and artists continue to celebrate these visions of interactivity in urban planning, artistic interventions and academic debates.

In recent years, the increase in the popularity of relational art practices and site-specific performances that engage people in precisely such a theatre of the everyday has meant a reproduction of this vision of the sidewalk ballet. These spontaneous interactions supposedly spur dialogue, trigger emotions and, as a result, strengthen collective citizenship. Often missing from this picture are the tensions of relational practices — when the encounter that is created raises the very class, racial and gender divisions that many street-based interventions ignore or steamroll with “play.” Do these types of art practices engage with the uneven political dynamics embedded in space? Who is a participant, and who and what spaces are the exotic “other” that need to be engaged within these notions of “interactivity?”

The 2006 issue of the *Canadian Theatre Review* celebrated site-specific performance that spurred dialogue and interaction. Citing theorists like Michel Foucault, Michel de Certeau and Walter Benjamin, the chapters celebrated the potential of interactive, relational and site-specific work in various interventions. These included social gatherings on public transit and under expressways, collaborative theatre productions in empty lots and on loading docks, and interactive walks where participants interviewed residents on the streets and in their yards. The array of examples in this issue illustrates how these practices provide artists and residents opportunities to collaborate in “heterotopian” and in-between spaces, collapsing the binaries that separate art and everyday life. The interventions illuminate how the spaces we live in and move through are part of a complicated, messy and creative process of interaction and dialogue. They also help enliven and bring humour and sensuality to increasingly privatized urban spaces. Caught up in enthusiasm and praise, however, the issue failed to explore the uneven power dimensions that can also be reproduced in these practices.



**THE THREE-MONTH CUPE 3903–YORK UNIVERSITY STRIKE ALSO SERVED AS A STREET-BASED INTERVENTION — A “BIG BOX” BALLET THAT DID AS MUCH TO OPPOSE JANE JACOBS’S VISION OF URBAN INTERACTION AS IT DID TO REVEAL THE COMPLEXITIES AND TENSIONS OF STREET-BASED SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT IN A DE-INDUSTRIALIZING LANDSCAPE OF SPRAWL AND BIG BOX STORES.**

This is a serious omission. In some examples, artists and academics engaging in interventions actually reproduce socially exclusive ways of engaging in increasingly gentrified and inaccessible urban spaces. In others, relational art practitioners insist that they are bringing fun and play to neighbourhoods that are actually losing their public spaces — splash pads, swimming pools and parks are all suffering from massive funding cuts. When these interventions take place in lower-income neighbourhoods, home to new immigrant communities, seniors and psychiatric survivors, as they often do — how comfortable are people in engaging in the resulting dynamics? As art historian and theorist Miwon Kwon points out in *One Place After Another* (2002), artists’ attempts to collaborate with lower-income communities are fraught with a range of uneven power dynamics between the artist searching for authentic experience and residents trying to just live their everyday lives.

In contrast to these relational practices, everyday life on the picket line in the three-month CUPE 3903–York University strike also served as a street-based intervention — a “big box” ballet that did as much to oppose Jane Jacobs’s vision of urban interaction as it did to reveal the complexities and tensions of street-based social engagement in a de-industrializing landscape of sprawl and big box stores. Precarious workers — graduate assistants, TAs and contract faculty from disparate departments where the commute makes it difficult to do collective research and work — banded together to challenge the political logic and social trends that help shape the fragmented landscape surrounding York University, a campus where fragmented learning takes place. A site of dialogue and interactivity, the picket line was a heterotopian space where a range of people collided in emotionally charged discussion about class sizes, the casualization of university workers, the economic crisis and labour rights across sectors. Contrary to many of the playful connections made by present-day relational art practitioners, we moved beyond play to engage the political layers of the picket line as we walked in circles and in and out of idling cars. The encounters and conversations we had illuminated the ways our lives are connected not only to one another, but to the broader politics of corporatization, precarity, fragmentation and collective action.

The strike at York University was a collective demand for better pay, more consistent funding and job security for contract faculty — 50% of undergraduate courses at York are taught by contract workers. And this situation is becoming endemic within universities across the country. It was a messy and long struggle in which the administration, from the start, refused to take union demands seriously or to spend time negotiating with our bargaining committee. Meanwhile, the media framed the union as an essential service and education as a commodity, attacking us for blocking our students from their educations. These reports conveniently overlooked the growing problems of overcrowded classrooms, the lack of funding for students and the fact that a large portion of picketers were also disrupting their academic timelines to challenge broader labour issues. The union was eventually forced back to work through anti-union legislation that was brought in under former Ontario Premier Mike Harris. This was the first time in Canadian history that a non-essential service was forced back. A week later a number of media outlets discussed a new report entitled “Ontario in the Creative Age” produced by the Martin Prosperity Institute at the University of Toronto. Extolling the virtues of knowledge, innovation, creativity and creative workers without discussing the increasing casualization of university and other forms of work, the report signalled the incredibly skewed way education is commodified, defined and policed.

Through the months on and off the picket line, creative forms of interactivity and dialogue were an ongoing part of the strike experience. My picket gate, formerly a banal entranceway into a York parking lot, transformed into a layered and complicated space where labour politics, gender and class dynamics and an incredible range of emotions were revealed.

We embodied these interactive practices by being cold and tired, crusty and cranky, overwhelmed and enthusiastic. A persistent runny nose is my reminder of the three months outside on the line. The snowy, windswept entranceway on Steeles Avenue was a site of constant surprises. We often arrived at 6:30 in the morning to find our porta-potty kicked over — once it was both kicked over and had a penis drawn on it — and then spent hours speaking



with drivers and trying to stay warm around the fire barrel. One cold day, a contractor waiting in line to work on a building’s heating system, pointed out that I had a ring of soot around one eye from the fire barrel. We both laughed hysterically because I looked like a Dalmatian. A friend stood nearby with corn niblets from the chilli that the union sometimes delivered to the line frozen to the fur of her parka. Another picketer had cake smeared on her face and she could not feel it: “My cheek is frozen,” she laughed. The fire barrel often glowed green from pressure-treated pallets that kept us warm, donated by an old man who collected them up and down Steeles Avenue. Some people even foraged in the parking lots for pinecones and twigs to burn.

In an era in which labour issues are ignored and abused by mainstream media, these interactions and conversations with people at the gate revealed the incredibly rich and layered networks of labour politics bubbling away in Greater Toronto, extending to a range of global struggles. Administrative support staff, construction workers, professors, couriers and mail carriers, all members of various unions, interacted with us at the gate. A man who had been involved in trade union politics in India, and who now works for a non-unionized and low-paying courier service, apologized every time he had to cross the line. When, out of curiosity and boredom, I asked an elegant, older woman if she had ever been on a picket line, she lit up. “I was in May ’68 in Paris when I was in medical school,” she said with pride. “The police attacked and seriously hurt some of my friends and they sprayed the protesters with paint,” she said before she drove off in her battered blue Toyota.

These daily improvised discussions were a way of connecting to a broader dialogue that shapes the policies we live within, question and contest. Many of these conversations involved angry drivers telling us how selfish and stupid we were. Some undergraduate students vented their frustration, and we tried to find ways to stay open and discuss the broader politics underlying the strike. We talked about these frustrations on the picket line and understood the anger many students felt. Their emotional reactions were understandable, considering that they were trying to navigate distorted, anti-union media messages, uneven class and race dynamics of knowledge

production, and fast-paced and overloaded university systems based on myths of merit and intellect. In so many ways, neo-liberalization makes us all tired, insecure and angry — we are understandably wound up.

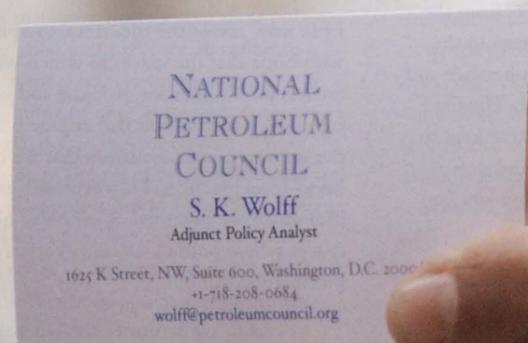
I can now revisit the theories underpinning relational aesthetics with hope that the spaces in which we live, work and play provide endless possibilities for dialogue and encounters. We should be cautious of art practices that engage with urban spaces while ignoring the uneven power dynamics that we can reproduce in neighbourhood-level practices. However, the experiences on the picket line illuminate the potential of everyday heterotopian and in-between spaces where politics, art and everyday life collapse together in productive dialogue.

And so we return to the big box ballet. The spontaneous interactions and developed relationships of the picket line did not take place in the utopic, dense, mixed-use urban spaces celebrated in Jane Jacobs’s writing. An increasingly gentrified and inaccessible ideal, most of us live and work in more fragmented spaces of sprawl, big box stores and arterial roads. Our union engaged with these spaces, triggering dialogue that challenged how we consume education and value university workers. Furthermore, these critical, street-based engagements provide a counterpoint to relational aesthetics projects and interventions that encourage fun, play and exploration in neighbourhoods where residents often end up providing the “authentic” backdrop. In contrast, the food-smeared faces, kicked-over porta-potties, burning pallets and endless, emotional, frustrating and rich dialogues about how all of our lives are fragmented by neo-liberalization are just a few of the contradictory and intense moments in the relations created by the strike at York. □

HEATHER MCLEAN is a Ph.D. student in the Faculty of Environmental Studies at York University and an Executive Member of the City Institute at York University. Her current research explores the intersections of community-based art, relational aesthetics and performance with neo-liberal, competitive city urban and culture planning.

# IMPERSONATING THE CAPTAINS OF INDUSTRY:

Noam Gonick in conversation with The Yes Men on stage at the Winnipeg Art Gallery



## The Yes Men impersonate the captains and mouthpieces of big business.

They have pulled off some of the most daring public hijinks in recent history, from impersonating Dow Chemical personnel on BBC News and announcing reparations to victims of the Bhopal chemical disaster to web culture-jamming and performance art presentations at exclusive corporate conferences. I first met Andy in San Francisco during his RTMark days in the late 90s. He was liberating Barbie dolls with the B.L.O, switching their voice-boxes with GI Joes' and then returning them to store shelves. I was on the run from a now-notorious steam bath incident at the Banff Centre that had me traveling on the down-low across the States. The closest The Yes Men have ever come to being arrested was also in Alberta at Calgary's GO-EXPO oil conference, where, posing as leaders of the oil industry, they proposed the benefits of transforming deceased victims of climate change into cheap energy. Their latest stunt involved creating and distributing 1.2 million copies of a fake issue of The New York Times that proclaimed an end to the war in Iraq, enacting an Obama Campaign election promise shortly after Barack Obama's presidential victory. All of these interventions are intended to stir shit up and put cultural producers in the driver's seat in determining our collective future. Who wants 2012 to look like a Woody Harrelson blockbuster? (Yes, folks, the movie 2012 is in the can and filmed in BC, no less! Coming out later this year). While we're at it, where does Jim Carrey's 2008 movie Yes Man fit in to all this?

Production still from The Yes Men Fix The World. Courtesy: The Yes Men.

# EVERYTHING WE DO IS ABOUT EXCITING PEOPLE

To clear things up, this year The Yes Men released a second movie: *The Yes Men Fix the World*, a documentary that travels to Bhopal and New Orleans to draw attention to the need for corporate and government reparations. The film expands The Yes Men's interventions beyond the business-people typically assembled for their performances and shocked (or titillated) conference-goers who get to witness The Yes Men's show live. I sat down with The Yes Men after the screening of their film to talk about Leftists thrown out of airplanes, tanking Dow Chemical stock and the art market for gold-coloured penis costumes.



# ABOUT POLITICAL ISSUES, EXCITING PEOPLE ABOUT THE IDEA OF CHANGING THE WORLD.

**Noam Gonick:** *I wanted to talk about "art that wants to change the world" because I know that's one of the goals of The Yes Men — to make work that inspires viewers towards radicalism. Many people think art can't change the world, that it's a silly goal to try to achieve. We don't feel that way in Winnipeg, but the idea's out there. What do you think? Can art change the world?*

**The Yes Men:** I think so. It can change the world in combination with thousands of people doing more important stuff. Trying to change laws, getting people what they need and, if necessary, rioting, which can be counted as social work. We see what we do as fitting into a bigger movement, bringing important messages to large audiences. Everything we do is about exciting people about political issues, exciting people about the idea of changing the world. We go on TV as Dow Chemical, or to conferences as Halliburton or Exxon, in part to show that it's possible. So it's for public consumption and it involves artifice.

**NG:** *The world at large is changing so much right now, and the art world is, too. The notion of commercial/corporate art may be falling apart; someone said to me that half the commercial galleries in New York will be closing this year. Do you think that we'll see a shift in the content of contemporary art because of the economic realities in the world?*

**YM:** I hope so. For us, the art market has been totally useless. We've never managed to sell anything. We've been approached three or four times by people who briefly thought they could sell something from what we do as art, but it never went anywhere. Somebody did buy the penis suit from an action featured in our first movie. There is a roving



<opposite page and this page> Production still from *The Yes Men Fix The World*. Courtesy: The Yes Men.

exhibition of the ephemera from the first film. It's gone to two places so far. But it's roving. Maybe the art market will change to value penis suits more than those chimp ceramics that guy made a few years ago. Then we'll be totally rich.

**NG:** *I wanted to talk about some of your influences. Sometimes when I see you in your suits I think of Gilbert & George. Maybe it's the queer influence, because I know your background of hacking kissing skateboarders into video games.*

**YM:** Inundating pixel boys randomly kissing, dozens of them, you could barely tell they were boys. The whole experiment evolved accidentally. I was sick of my job

as a computer programmer, and I figured instead of just quitting I should get fired. It was this macho little video game, and I did get fired, but it got massive media coverage, and it was exciting, so I kept going with contestational art. The Yes Men started when we set up a fake World Trade Organization web site because we couldn't get to the Seattle protests of 1999. A couple of months later, it accidentally started getting invitations to conferences. So we went.

**NG:** *Were the big pre-9/11 protests, The Battle in Seattle, the anti-IMF rally in Washington, DC big influences?*

**YM:** Yeah, we went to them, those post-1999 protests that were the first ones in the West, but previously there were mass

protests in developing countries. All that protesting started in the developing world, took forever for the First World to realize there was something wrong with radical capitalism. Me, I'd also been to Act Up protests. That was my political awakening, sort of.

**NG:** *I know you're pals with Naomi Klein, and in your new film the images of you two floating in the water reminds me of her descriptions in The Shock Doctrine of leftists being thrown out of helicopters over the ocean. Are you channeling Naomi?*

**YM:** Nobody's mentioned that yet, wow, and it never occurred to me, but now it seems obvious. Why didn't you say that months ago?

# SINCE WE'RE HUMAN, WE HAVE THIS IDEA THAT OTHER PEOPLE

NG: You didn't show me a rough cut, but you can use that if you want and make it your own.

YM: Thank you.

NG: Do you think Stephen Colbert owes something to *The Yes Men*, this stance of becoming the businessman and acting out that right-wing role, taking it to such an extreme that it becomes comedic?

YM: People do say that occasionally, but I don't think so.

NG: Have you been taken to task for espousing right-wing concepts in public in a way that the elite never would? In some ways aiding these corporate forces, because the populace ingests, under the guise of satire, horrible ideas that wouldn't see the light of day otherwise?



Film still from *The Yes Men Fix The World*. Courtesy: The Yes Men.

# ARE HUMAN, TOO, AND WE IMAGINE THAT SOMEWHERE THERE ARE PEOPLE WHO ARE WORRIED ABOUT OUR WELL-BEING.

YM: It's probably good to imagine what an Exxon executive might do in the event of catastrophic climate change. Do they really give a shit at all? Since we're human, we have this idea that other people are human, too, and we imagine that somewhere there are people who are worried about our well-being. But they're not, because they're part of giant corporations, and those things aren't human. They're legal constructs whose only goal is to prosper and grow. No matter what. Even if they kill people. Like, when we went on the BBC as Dow and cleaned up Bhopal, Dow's stock tanked. If they'd really done that, the CEO would have been fired. So no, people don't actually exist within corporations. They're human voids, like outer space, sort of, but noisier. □

Special thanks to Professor Jonah Ezra Come for producing the screening.

*The Yes Men* were brought to Winnipeg through the combined efforts of Plug In ICA, the University of Manitoba Department of Literature, Film & Theatre and the Winnipeg Art Gallery.

NOAM GONICK is a filmmaker-artist weaving narrative tapestries with rave apocalypse, NDN arson gangs, the UBC Thunderbirds, the 1919 General Strike, psychics & retail queens on TV (to name a few threads). He's lecturing on his work at the Serpentine Gallery this summer.

## artist-run Calgary

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Jasmine Valentina

Marcy Adzich, Beth Howe & Christine Cheung  
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Misaki Kawai

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Matt Mullican

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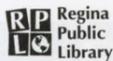
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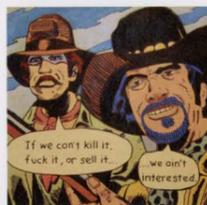
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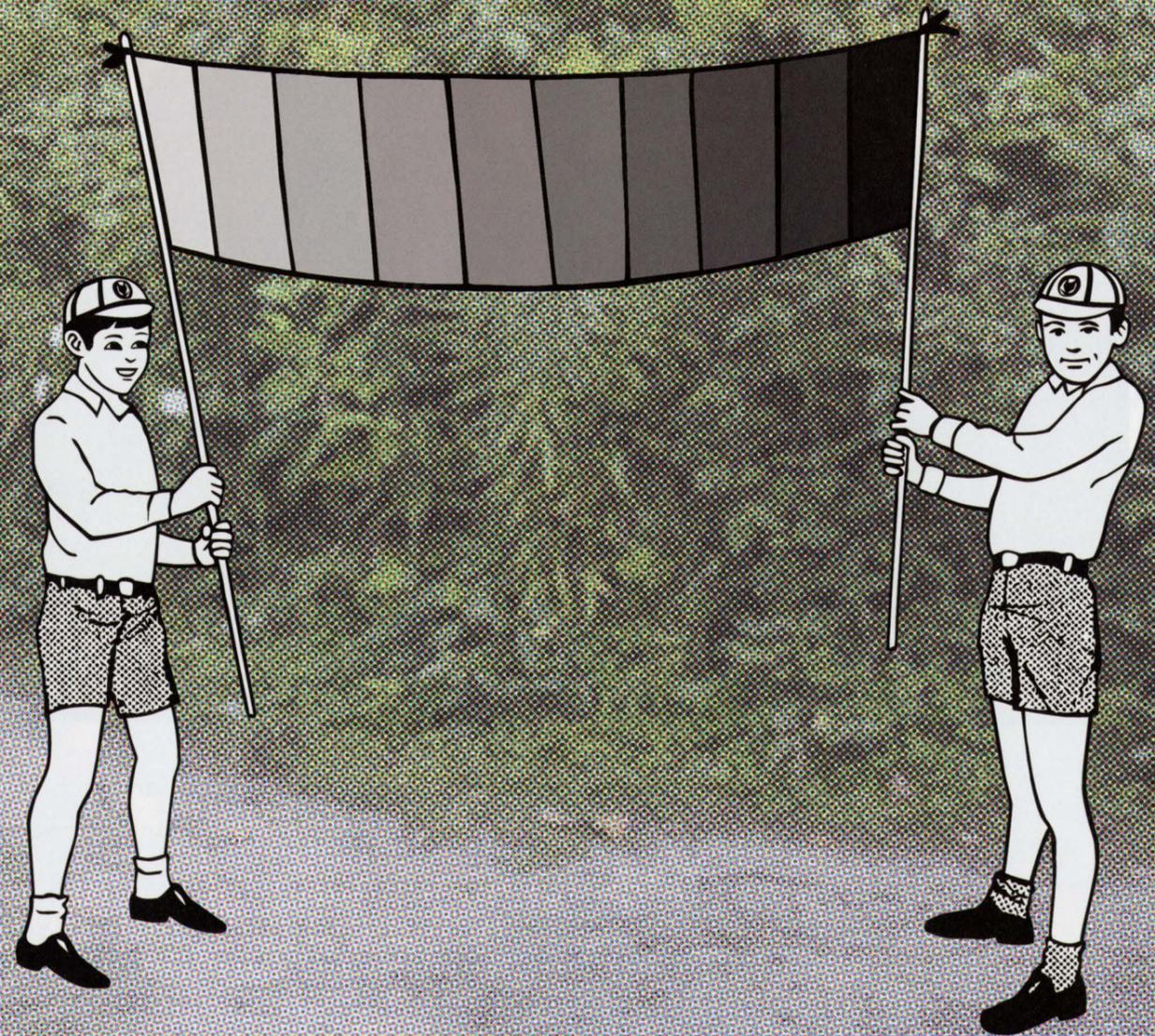
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DARYL VOCAT is a printmaker living and working in Toronto. The characters in his work arise from found, manipulated and redrawn Boy Scout illustrations. Removed from their environment, the boys are introduced to a world of ambiguity. Moving toward adulthood, they are left negotiating the space between the world they are from, and the world they have arrived in.



After negotiating their way past five helmeted, baton-wielding “riot police,” partygoers at the AGO were entertained by performances and small roaming groups of “protesters.” The Baillie Court was dedicated to John Lennon and Yoko Ono’s Bed-in with footage from the 1969 Montréal protest, while a dozen young “hippies” performed sit-ins in the various rooms. A smaller group of “environmentalists,” complete with gas masks, “Green is the New Black” and “S.O.S. There is no Plan(et) B!” signs, repeatedly tried to storm the party but were pushed back by “riot police.” Clusters of female protesters, wearing army shorts, combat boots, white undershirts and the occasional kafia, held placards reading “Fight for your Right to Party” or “Join the Uprising,” and tried to stir up a following from the amused patrons. The Massive Uprising party showed a young, monied crowd that protests’ motivations and messages are less important than their aesthetic spectacle.

During the G20 Summit in London, bankers were advised to wear casual clothes on their way to work to avoid being detected by protestors, many of whom were incensed by banking and investment industry greed

and corruption — especially in light of recent corporate bailout packages and bonuses. It is fitting that the non-media corporate sponsors of the AGO party are all in the financial industry: Claymore Investments, Inc., Equity Transfer & Trust Company and Investors Group Inc. The party’s presentation of protest as meaningless spectacle reflects perfectly the message that the financial industry appears to be taking from the public outcries. Protests are presented as fun, harmless and without substance.

But just as gentrification rolls through neighbourhoods that were once home to medium to lower income people, creating overpriced, Starbucks-laden districts, the popular culture machine is eating up progressive elements to transform them into bland, dislocated simulacra. At the Massive Uprising party, signs of struggles, past and present, were used to add extra edge to the theme: the “A” of the AGO logo was turned into an anarchy symbol and printed on cocktail napkins; meaningless graffiti tags and more anarchy symbols adorned tablecloths; signs with the British WWII slogan “Keep Calm and Carry On” were randomly posted; and the Zacks wing was decorated in the style of a

jungle encampment with dimmed lights and camouflage netting. Throughout the space, servers wore uniforms of all black with red berets and armbands. All of these signifiers, taken out of context and placed into a consumerist mash-up, become a new market-friendly, protest chic aesthetic, ready to be embraced by the neo-liberal economy.

In a wing of the gallery not in use during the Massive Uprising, Rebecca Belmore’s *Rising to the Occasion* (1987–1991) was just visible. The piece is an elaborate costume that Belmore wore during the Duke and Duchess of York’s 1987 visit to Thunder Bay, Ontario. As part of the performance *Twelve Angry Crinolines*, this piece was a critique of the effects of colonialism on Native Peoples. On the evening of April 2, sitting on a raised platform in a darkened corridor, Belmore’s voice is as silent as all the protestors whose actions have been appropriated by the AGO’s fundraising effort. □

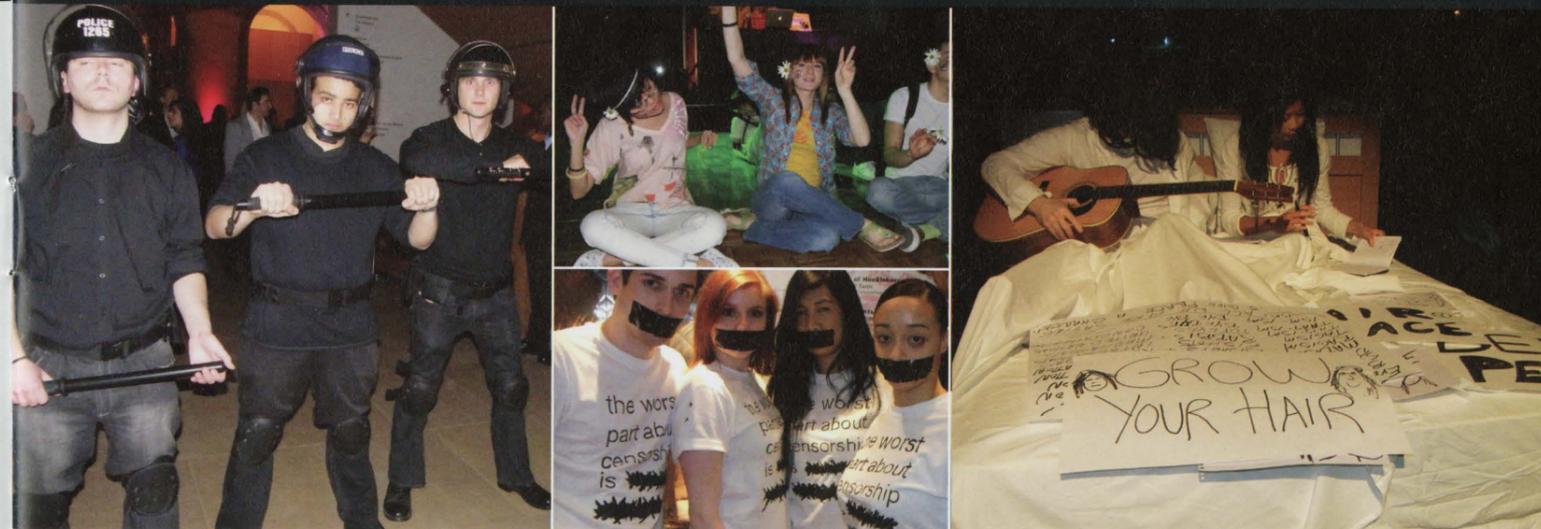
AARON CAIN is a writer and photographer. You can find his writing on the recent El Salvador elections at [activistintraining.blogspot.com](http://activistintraining.blogspot.com)

# WHAT A RIOT!

BY AARON CAIN

On April 2, the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) held its annual fundraising event. This year’s theme was “Massive Uprising” and, as described in their press release, the event offered “defiant music, consumerist cocktails, hedonistic hors d’oeuvres and provocative artists’ projects.” In case that description sounds too radical, the release goes on to explain, “Riot Police will be on hand to quell the uprising and keep the peace, while partygoers will be inspired to make love, not war.” On the same day in London, England, the G20 Summit was being held and, as the CBC reported, over 4,000 protesters took to the streets, leaving over 100 arrested and one man dead.

Snap shots from AGO’s 2009 “Massive Uprising” fund raising event. Photo: Jody Glaser – About Town Photos.



# USES OF THE IMAGE

## JEN BUDNEY *IN CONVERSATION* WITH JULIAN STALLABRASS

Julian Stallabrass is a British art historian and critic who lectures in modern and contemporary art at the Courtauld Institute of Art in London, UK. His writings have been widely published in books such as *High Art Lite: British Art in the 1990s* (1999), *Internet Art: The Online Clash of Culture and Commerce* (2003), and *Art Incorporated: The Story of Contemporary Art* (2004), as well as journals such as *Third Text*, *New Left Review*, *Art Monthly*, and the *New Statesman*. Stallabrass's published work has centred on issues arising from developments in contemporary British art, the history of photography, the

relationship between fine art and mass culture, and the political role of art. Since the mid-1990s, he has been considered a somewhat "controversial" figure in the British art scene as a result of his opinions on the celebrated and notorious YBAs — Young British Artists, such as Damien Hirst, Tracy Emin and the Chapman Brothers — and his ongoing writings on art world complicity with the neo-liberal order.

In 2001, Stallabrass organized *Art and Money Online* at the Tate Britain,<sup>1</sup> an exhibition that explored the impact of commercialization on the Internet, a subject that remains central to his ongoing research. More recently, he curated the Brighton Photo Biennial (2008). Entitled *Memory of Fire: The War of Images and Images of War*, Stallabrass's ambitious project showcased some of the most challenging images by photojournalists working in international war zones, as well as installations by artists such as Thomas Hirschhorn, whose 18-metre-long work *The Incommensurable Banner* presented horrifying images of war victims that have been excluded from the mainstream media. *Memory of Fire* was designed as a political intervention — a shock treatment for trying times.

**JEN BUDNEY:** In *Art Incorporated* and other writings, you argued that the “free space” of the contemporary art world — where, it is commonly believed, anything may be said or shown — is actually a supplement to and sanction of free trade or neo-liberalism. In other words, while the mass media reproduces the status quo, more challenging or even radical points of view are tolerated in the field of art because they “prove” free speech exists while remaining marginalized to the point of near-insignificance. I recall Cuban friends of mine expressing much the same sentiments about the role of art in their country, specifically that artistic expression has been encouraged on the island to offer (rather false) evidence of freedoms under Castro’s regime. I am interested in how unwilling we seem in the art world to look too closely at the ways in which contemporary art, whether in Canada, the UK, Cuba or China, may serve as a kind of mask for political or economic regimes or consumer culture. Last spring, at a curatorial summit in Toronto, one well-known curator described the art world as “a last refuge for radical politics,” with no sense of irony. What are your thoughts on why we hold this belief so dear?

Western states have, of course, kidnapped, murdered and tortured people, including their own citizens, for a long time, but usually with some semblance of secrecy. To openly parade such behaviour as laudable, to so publicly flout the law, and to accompany this with invasions and occupations of an imperialist mould, and at the same time for this to elicit relatively little public response (at least after the Iraq war began) — the whole situation seemed unspeakable. And so one had to speak.

**JULIAN STALLABRASS:** The effect is much easier for us to see in other political systems than our own, so the way that the limited freedoms of art serve as a mask for a variety of servitudes seems obvious when we think about Cuba and perhaps China, and perverse when applied at home. At the same time, the art world is indeed the refuge for all sorts of utopian and idealist notions, among them some forms of radical politics, particularly those that do not insist too hard on efficacy and power. It can be a refuge because no one expects the form or content of art, ensconced in its realm where it is protected from mass culture and the working environment, to have an effect on the wider world. It is the very fact that this enclave exists, rather than what it happens to be occupied with, that serves as the apparent assurance of our freedom. But, because art’s ideological function is a powerful one, I don’t advocate disengagement from it. In *Art Incorporated*, I point to various contradictions in art’s mak-

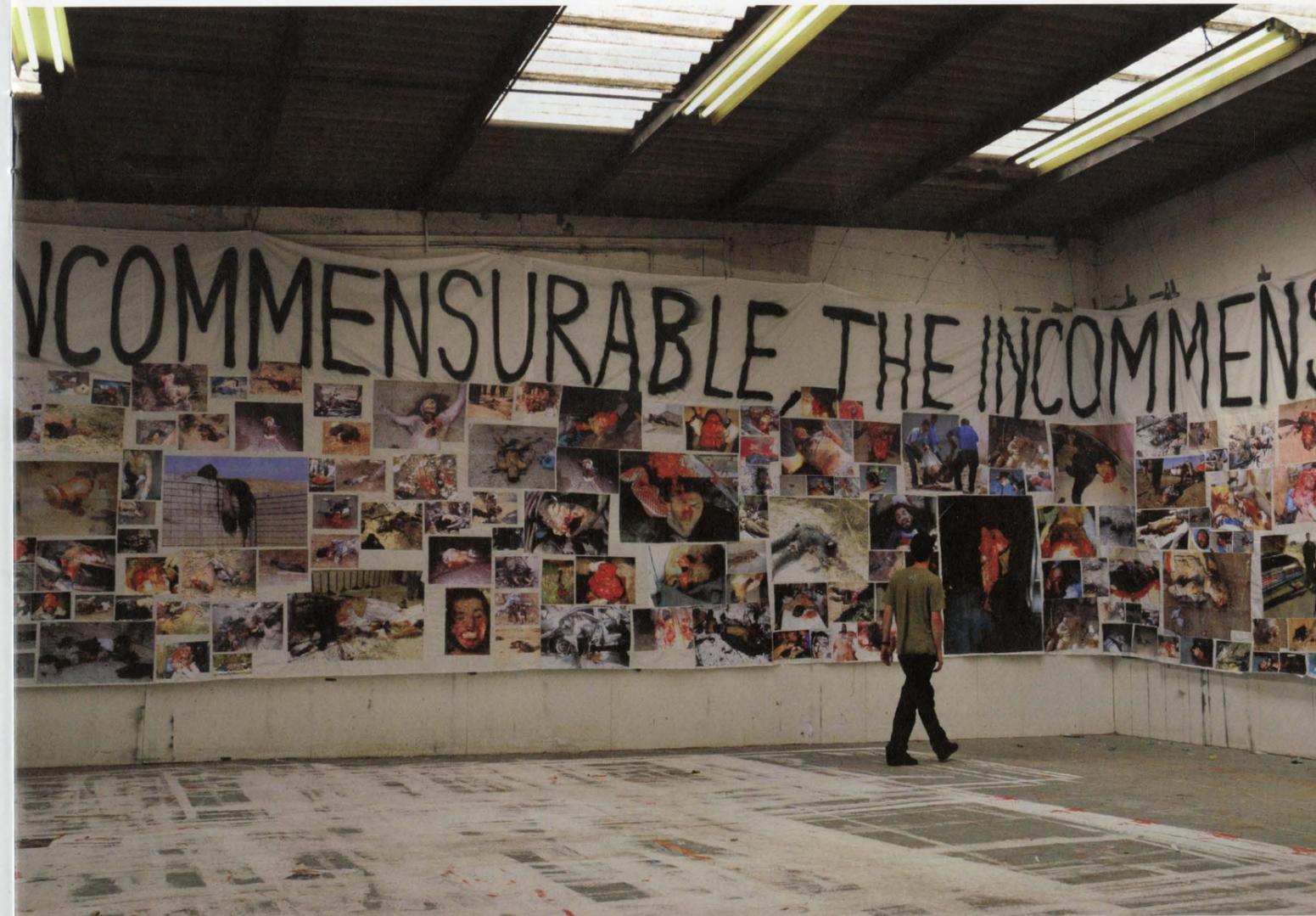
ing, display and consumption that can be pushed to greater visibility. For example, to highlight the absurdity of the art market’s restriction on the mass production of an art that has become increasingly reproducible and, indeed, digital. To do that is also to encourage people to understand the art world as a market, to ask concrete questions about how its supply and demand are regulated, to see that there are many rules of art (if only we come to recognize them), and that the art world is a part of the instrumental order that it seems to abjure.

**JB:** The expansion of digitization has coincided almost simultaneously with that of the “globalization” of the art world. You have argued, like Coco Fusco and others, that globalization has transformed the art world along the model of corporate internationalism, where racial and cultural diversity are normalized and their critical content circumvented, so that visibility within the realm of art does not guarantee political power. I think that observation speaks to many of the concerns shared by culturally diverse artists and arts organizations in Canada, and most especially those of Aboriginal artists. Do you have any observations or thoughts about how arts administrators, curators, artists, art writers, etc. can avoid reproducing our own or others’ differences as just another set of “signs” in a sort of smorgasbord of identity?

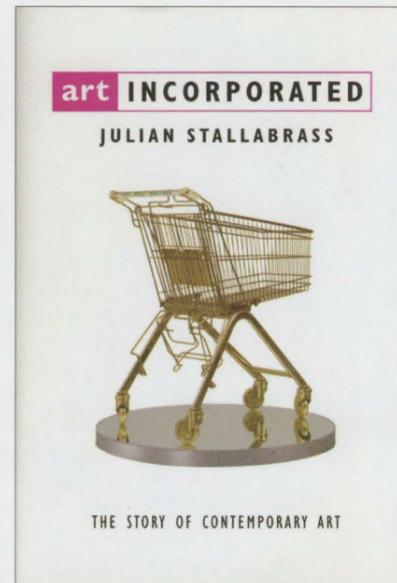
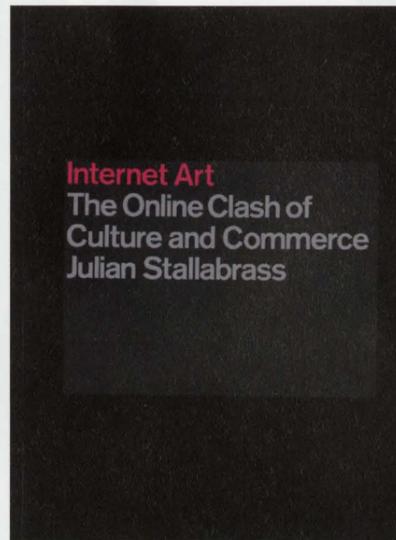
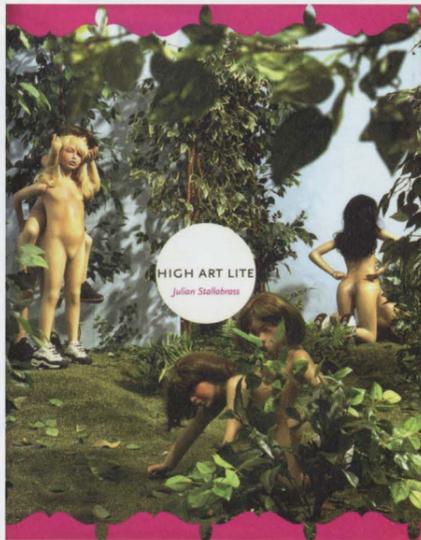
**JS:** It’s difficult for all cultural producers to escape such a fate, simply because we are not in control of our reception or of the environment into which our work is launched. When I curated *Art and Money Online*, I arrived at the opening to see, at the entrance to the exhibition, a sponsor’s board which was entirely new to me: it offered an interpretation of the contents which was diametrically opposed to my own! All you can do is make a serious attempt to understand that environment, to play on its weak points and contradictions, and to make work that is at least difficult to make sense of in the standard ways. But there are no guarantees of success, of course, and each cultural foray should be understood as an experiment.

**JB:** You were an early advocate of net art (and remain so, I presume) — including, for example, Antonio Muntadas’s *The File Room* (an archive of cultural censorship) and the work of RTMark, which brings together different activists to creatively interfere with a variety of corporate campaigns and agendas. The Internet itself has become a space of massive corporate interest, with advertisements flooding virtually every site. Does making an impact through the practice of “tactical media” become more difficult as the Internet becomes “noisier” in this regard?

**JS:** It’s tempting to claim that there was a “utopian moment” in net art (as Martha Rosler does for video), that being the point at which the browser was invented, opening online space to a broad public before the to-the-hilt commercial exploitation of that environment took hold. But I think it would be wrong to hold to that appealing but romantic notion. Much early net art used commercial interventions as its raw material, and of course those opportunities are far



Thomas Hirschhorn. *The Incommensurable Banner* (studio and detail view), 2007. Courtesy: Thomas Hirschhorn Studio.



<left to right> Julian Stallabrass. High Art Lite: British Art in the 1990s. Verso Books: 1999, revised edition in 2006; Internet Art: The Online Clash of Culture and Commerce. Tate: 2003; Art Incorporated: The Story of Contemporary Art. Oxford University Press: 2004.

richer and more varied now than they were, bringing about the opportunity to employ new tactics. Just one example: unofficial podcasts giving guides to museum shows, which offer a wonderful opportunity for subversion and the inculcation of counter-memory — especially for those institutions, such as MoMA, which try to control who is allowed to speak in front of their displays. Adverts and criminality saturate the Internet, but its character is at least clear to its users, and we hear much less of the boosterish nonsense (the emergence of a universal consciousness, etc.) that accompanied its emergence. That's probably healthy.

And, it seems to me, there has recently been a renewed interest in the history and fate of net.art, which may well be a product of the current financial crisis.

**JB:** Although net.art has been around for well over a decade now, as far as I am aware it falls off the radar in the curricula of most art colleges and university fine arts programs. Perhaps this is not a surprise (many university programs still barely teach video, after all), but it brings me around to the notion expressed many years ago by Paul Virilio: that art is no longer found in galleries and museums — which are the venues for which fine art students are directed to produce their work. Instead, Virilio argued, art is found “where ever-changing social situations condense.” Do you agree with this?

**JS:** It may be that the art schools you know and those I know are a bit different. In general, of course, they follow the agendas set by

museums and galleries, which have certainly been back-pedaling on their engagement with online art since the burst of the dot-com bubble, and for perfectly transparent reasons. Yet there are artists working in the schools who had and still have an engagement with online art and are interested in its history. While artists don't want to categorize themselves as net artists, they use the online world as part of their practice, as one set of tools among many. And, it seems to me, there has recently been a renewed interest in the history and fate of net.art, which may well be a product of the current financial crisis. It does not take great perspicacity to see that one way to step around the glut of luxury commodities and the lack of funds to buy them is to produce immaterial works freely given away, or that among the ideological responses to the crisis may be a revival of the avant-garde and collectivist elements of early net.art.

As for Virilio, any such claim brings us to the perennially knotty (and, one might say, unproductive) problem of the definition of art: and in addition, that despite the habits of recognition that most people adopt in saying that this is either art or not art, that there is some real, ideal and mostly unrecognized art that is found largely outside art's institutions. There are plenty of activities that are usually unacknowledged by the art world that have art-like attributes, from amateur photography to flash mobbing (I tried to analyze some of them as if they were art in my book *Gargantua*). At the same time, you cannot wish away the powerful institutional forces that create art as we know it and police the boundaries between art, work and mass culture.

**JB:** I wonder if he didn't simply mean that art can no longer effect political change in the world through galleries and museums ...

a notion, then, that would fall near to many of your arguments? Virilio was interested at this time in the work of Lucy Orta, whose first *Refuge Wear* pieces were staged in the streets of Paris as a form of protest or an activist response to the graphic images of Kurdish refugees broadcast by the media during the 1991 American invasion of Iraq. Her work was designed as an intervention of sorts, similar to the 2008 Brighton Photo Biennial, which you curated. Your exhibition focused on images of war, primarily by photojournalists, who, in the art world, are generally considered “non-artists.” What led you to curate the Biennial?

**JS:** I was led, simply enough, by the “war on terror,” which seems to me to be one of the defining issues of our time. Western states have, of course, kidnapped, murdered and tortured people, including their own citizens, for a long time, but usually with some semblance of secrecy. To openly parade such behaviour as laudable, to so publicly flout the law, and to accompany this with invasions and occupations of an imperialist mould, and at the same time for this to elicit relatively little public response (at least after the Iraq war began) — the whole situation seemed unspeakable. And so one had to speak.

At the same time, the idea of curating the Brighton Photo Biennial was appealing because it reached out beyond the usual art audience to, for example, the many photographic enthusiasts on the south coast. The Biennial was seen in a variety of spaces, and we made a number of events (including a soapbox and public display of opinions about the war, involving local schoolchildren, and the Mass Observation archive orchestrated by Anthony Lam) that tested the boundaries of “art.”

**JB:** Did you approach the Biennial organizers or did they approach you? Was there any hesitation on their part to engage so directly with — I don't even want to say “politics,” but with this reality?

**JS:** I was asked by the then-director of the Biennial, John Gill, following a talk I had given at the previous Biennial conference about war photography in Vietnam and Iraq, so he was fully aware of what I was likely to do, and I am very grateful for his vision and bravery. I was not privy to the deliberations of the board who would have discussed my appointment and the theme, but I know that they thought there were advantages to a theme that was of direct and urgent political concern, and that it was likely to draw in audiences beyond photography and fine art enthusiasts. And it did work out like that, in fact.

**JB:** What kind of research did you then have to undertake? Your exhibition generated a great deal of discussion on the phenomenon of embedded photographers and the military or state control of what kind of images we (the public) see coming out of war zones. This was, I presume, one of your primary goals.

**JS:** The research was of various kinds: at the most basic level, it was paying close attention to how images were being used in newspapers and on websites. With help, I tracked some notorious images (for example, those taken at Abu Ghraib) across their various uses on the Web. I had the privilege of talking to some of those who had made the images, and learned a great deal from them — particularly from Philip Jones Griffiths, Don McCullin, Ashley Gilbertson and Geert van Kesteren. Then, of course, the war has produced a great deal of literature, many reflections on the way that embedding has influenced media coverage and, more broadly, on the debility of the mass media in the face of the Bush government's PR operations. And, lastly, there are more theoretical works on memory, photography and images of war from writers such as Ariella Azoulay. I am still working on this subject, so coming to terms with this large literature is a work in progress.

In the Biennial exhibition, *Iraq Through the Lens of Vietnam*, I contrasted the work of embedded and independent photojournalists to suggest to viewers some of the consequences of embedding. The picture is not a simple one, though, and it is certainly possible to make critical work in an embedded situation, as Ashley Gilbertson's photographs clearly show.

I was very struck by one of Gilbertson's photographs of a soldier either putting away or pulling out his own digital camera as he stands next to the horribly mutilated body of an Iraqi citizen. The image is wide open for interpretation — it could speak of the soldier's callousness in the face of a grisly discovery, of his pride at a murderous accomplishment, of his own need to witness, or many other possibilities. Above all, it makes me conscious of the vast millions of unsanctioned images of this terrible violence that must exist in the world today thanks to the ubiquity of digital cameras.

**JB:** The image is shocking, as are many of the works in the Brighton Biennial, including, most aggressively, perhaps, Thomas Hirschhorn's *The Incommensurable Banner*, a room-scale collage of some of the most horrifying images from the “war on terror” that have been excluded from the mainstream media. How have people been digesting such images in the show, and how did you present the exhibition to children?

**JS:** That Gilbertson photograph summed up many things for me, and captures the notion of “the war of images” perfectly. It is indeed very hard to know what the motivations of the pictured photographer were, but pictorial trophy-taking has been a regular feature of warfare since cameras became cheap and portable enough for soldiers to bring into combat. Instamatics and other small cameras were carried by many US troops in Vietnam who would take photographs of the worst things that they did. Many of their photographs, no doubt, are still stored in thousands of homes across the US. Digitization, and especially the ease of transmitting photo-

graphs, does change things, and makes the military a machine that continually leaks unofficial images. Hirschhorn found many of them for his collage of horror, in print and online.

Reactions to the Hirschhorn were varied, and (on the evidence of the comments book) frequently passionate, engaged, thoughtful and sophisticated. Some could not look at it, some enjoyed it and took their own visual records of it, many were repulsed by it but thought it necessary that it should be shown, and many were led to question the exclusion of such imagery from the mass media. I have reproduced some of the comments on the Biennial website.<sup>2</sup>

**JB:** There's often talk of the ubiquity of violent images in our lives — particularly in the movies and on TV — and of the damage this does our psyches, inuring us or even inspiring us to aggression and cruelty. But in this case, your argument is that we haven't seen or been shown enough, and the comments left by viewers of Hirschhorn's installations largely echo this sentiment. These "true" images of war have "woken them up" to the war's injustice.

You know, I think it is quite remarkable that Hirschhorn took on this project, when the vast majority of artists in the West have not engaged with the "war on terror" or the violence perpetrated by their countries. In other decades, we would see many exhibitions by collectives of artists protesting war, but this has not been the case in Canada (and I have not heard much about them in the US or UK). What do you make of this?

It is indeed very hard to know what the motivations of the pictured photographer were, but pictorial trophy-taking has been a regular feature of warfare since cameras became cheap and portable enough for soldiers to bring into combat.

**JS:** There are many violent images in the general culture, of course, and some of them are bloodily explicit, as in those combat films that strive for realism (*Black Hawk Down* is a US Marine favourite, apparently), slasher movies and many computer games. Many members of the US armed forces watch or play such things, and some have talked about how it has inured them to combat situations. Even so, the violence in those cultural products is framed, composed and manifestly fictional, and is quite different from seeing an amateur photograph of a corpse, or fragment of a corpse, of a person. It is less, perhaps, the manner in which their bodies are torn apart that matters but of the viewer's knowledge that they are also seeing the register of the erasure of a mind — of memories, a temperament, skills and knowledge, and the rupturing of a set of social relations. For me, Hirschhorn's piece opened up a view on the dizzying abyss in which the continuing multiplication of those losses can be seen.

There are not many works like it, and the art world is structurally biased against producing them. The pressing danger of a work being seen as pure politics or propaganda is one such bias: the idea that the work of art must maintain an ideal uselessness that permits the free exercise of subjectivity both on the part of the artist and the viewer. So, in most "political" works, the rhetoric of political representation is set against any "simple" reading of content, plunging viewers into a maze of over-interpretation. The art world is also constitutionally individualist, and that alone brings it into tension with any political project based on collective effort. In this light, even Hirschhorn may be seen as a personality, whose commitment and politics are sanctioned within the art world as manifestations of his eccentric signature style, and would lose their particular charm if occupied by masses of artists or propagandists.

**JB:** Under the current conditions, where most art institutions are, more than ever before, in a desperate bid to please both government and corporate funders and quite often to present themselves as populist (even if few curators and administrators on the inside really buy into this), do you think there is any room for deeper cultural/political engagement in or by museums and public art galleries? It seems to me (and your experience at Brighton would support this) that people want to engage in real-world issues in a more profound way. Indeed, those mazes of over-interpretation, along with the vacuous conceptualism of some other art, seem to turn most people off.

**JS:** One thing that surprised me about the Biennial was the warm reception given it by the Arts Council. I think that for them the controversial character of the theme was tied to a positive appeal to a broad audience. And indeed all the Biennial venues reported higher-than-usual visitor numbers and — at least anecdotally — different kinds of visitors. On the other hand, private sponsorship proved to be extremely difficult to get!

This points to tensions between the agendas of those state and business interests that support the arts: an obvious tension is that business tends to want access to the art world because it offers a way to grab the attention of an elite, well-educated and somewhat advertisement-resistant set of consumers; many states wish to see art as a social medicine to patch up the wounds inflicted by neo-liberal exposure to market forces, and so want to encourage as wide a participation as possible. It may be that these tensions can be productively exploited to stage politically pertinent work, especially now that the relative strength of the business sector has been so much reduced.

**JB:** I'm wondering how you conceive of curatorial projects that make not only their politics but their contexts and purposes clear. How do you negotiate working with institutions that must answer not just to the public but also to corporate sponsors? And what would you like to do for your next curatorial project?

**JS:** I don't have any immediate curatorial plans, but something that Steve Edwards said in a remarkable review of the Biennial got me



An American military policeman photographs a dead Mahdi Army fighter in Karbala on May 6, 2004. Photo: Ashley Gilbertson / VII Network, 2004.

thinking. He used Brecht's famous quote which says that the image of a factory does not tell you anything about the human relations inside it, and argued that, while it was good to give little-seen images of war new prominence and context, the essential task of documentary is to trace those relations and their causal determinants. I can think of a few photographic documentary books that do that, but managing it curatorially, while producing an exhibition or Biennial that is experienced mostly visually rather than read, would be a fascinating challenge.

I think that part of what Steve is asking is to imagine a display in which images would serve even more openly instrumental roles and in which their political functioning in the engine of war would become clear, along with the reasons why the engine was running. At least insofar as you were using artists' works, that would im-

mediately bring you into conflict with the fundamental position and ideology of the art world with which we started: that art works are delicate emanations of individual subjectivities and that it would be a betrayal to put them to use. □

JEN BUDNEY is Associate Curator at the Mendel Art Gallery. Her most recent essay appears in the exhibition catalogue *NeoHoodoo: Art for a Forgotten Faith*, and her next major project is a touring retrospective of Jayce Salloum, opening in October.

**NOTES:**

1. [www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/artnow/art\\_and\\_money\\_online/default.shtm](http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/artnow/art_and_money_online/default.shtm)
2. [www.bpb.org.uk/2008/blog/3229/thomas-hirschhorn-the-incommensurable-banner/](http://www.bpb.org.uk/2008/blog/3229/thomas-hirschhorn-the-incommensurable-banner/)

# IMMIGRANTS DON'T RUN THE COUNTRY, BUT THEY MAKE THE COUNTRY RUN

If capital can  
cross borders,  
SO CAN WE!



FAVIANNA RODRIGUEZ is a printmaker and digital artist based in Oakland, California. Using high-contrast colors and vivid figures, her composites reflect literal and imaginative migration, global community and interdependence.

Nearly 800,000 people migrate across each year in search of work. Migrants trek through dangerous conditions going to where globalization takes jobs.

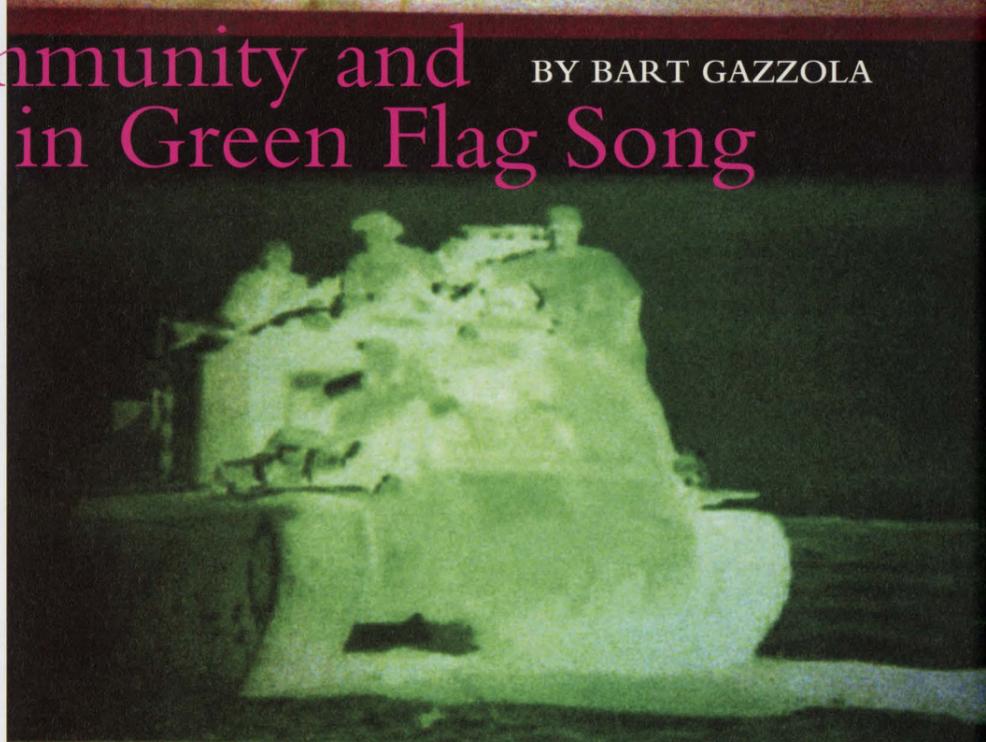
It's time that international trade agreements be held accountable!

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Joni Mitchell. *Green Flag Song* (Image #15), 2006. Courtesy: the artist.



## Culture, Community and Audience in *Green Flag Song* BY BART GAZZOLA



The February opening of Joni Mitchell's *Green Flag Song* at the Mendel Art Gallery was a significant point of contention within the Saskatoon arts community, a small and sometimes vitriolic site. The exhibition raised a number of latent issues around public gallery programming. Assertions that Mitchell is "touristing," that by giving her a solo show the Mendel is pandering to "philistines" at city hall or in government (who hold the purse strings), and that this exhibition bastardizes the Mendel's vision, were made before the show was even mounted, and continue now, by some who haven't seen the work. I don't excuse or spare myself here. I was waiting, knives out, to savage this show. But after seeing the work, speaking to the Mendel's Vince Varga and Dan Ring, and stepping back from some of my biases, I have come to begrudgingly admit that the work is far better than I expected. More exactly, I have come to understand that the exhibition in the gallery is only the focus for a number of issues that brought it there. These also continue to influence how this community sees it.

Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me. That would be the easy, knee-jerk reaction to the decision to exhibit new work by pop icon Joni Mitchell: the media flurry around her previous exhibition of paintings was massive, the reception spilling out of the gallery onto the grass and down to

the river. As I teased Gallery Director Gilles Hébert, perhaps the person most directly responsible for that show, one would have to make a deal with the devil to garner that kind of publicity for the Mendel. That work, however, left a great deal to be desired and a bad taste in the mouths of many in the arts community here. While understanding the Mendel's need to walk a line between disparate groups, many still felt that perhaps that line had been crossed.

A community-oriented gallery has many groups that are stakeholders, including the aforementioned politicians, artists in the community (in their many different groups and divisions), and the community at large. Often times they are at odds. The Mendel has been excellent in balancing this: it plays as a site to engage with Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun's *An Indian Act: Shooting the Indian Act*, balanced with Dan Ring's *Qu'Appelle: Past Present Future*, a positive, "joyous" historical narrative. But this is the real world, and when the City of Saskatoon contributes to a gallery, it expects to be represented. This can be the annual School Art show, or exhibitions that proclaim classic "celebratory histories" (the exhibition devoted to the 70-year-old Saskatoon Camera Club, for example). Both have their place here, and it is a site that belongs to many "artists," even Mitchell.

There are people in this broader community who have been coming to the Mendel since they were children and occupy a large part of the group of cultural consumers who make themselves heard when the City or the Province decides to "re-prioritize." Mitchell is one of these supporters, and one could argue that the lending of her name to the Mendel can only assist the gallery in securing a wider public and wider funding. This is a sensitive assertion. Is the show a publicity stunt to appease a segment of the wider community, to allow for "genuine" artists, less "palatable" to the aforementioned politicians? Is it cynical to suggest that *Green Flag Song* allows for the exhibition of Rebecca Belmore's *Blood on the Snow*, and that each has its own valid community?

Continuing in this somewhat pragmatic viewing, here's perhaps the worst of cows I'll be butchering today: *Green Flag Song* is fairly good. Bluntly, I've seen much worse at the Mendel, and I've seen better. To steal the curator's words, "*Green Flag Song* is a deeply personal response to the consequences of war and humanity's struggle with itself ... large green-toned triptychs ... digitally modified combinations of photographic images printed on canvas ... Mitchell's malfunctioning television began emitting images that resembled green-tinted photographic negatives ... she took photographs of the dying screen ... enlarged and printed on canvas producing intense, dark, semiabstract images ..." The room is a darker grey, playing off these sickly green images, and leaving you feeling somewhat ill if you spend too long with them. I'm reminded of Alejandro Jodorowsky's films, such as the surrealist *The Holy Mountain*, as the triptychs have images of Jesus with his crown, a soldier obviously smoking a fattie, and others that are dream-like, referencing *Apocalypse Now* more than CNN or FOX News, thank God.

I'm not very focused on process here, with her television and such. Formally, the denseness of the gallery is more relevant, with the images stretching floor to ceiling, giving no relief. The images are numbered (out of order), which means there are more, and that makes it more horrifying: like in *Starship Troopers*, the Orwellian idea that the war is never over, always happening, and we'll make sure the images keep coming keep coming keep coming...

What of the notion of celebrity in the germination of this exhibition? After all, last time Mitchell's work was shown at the gallery, the running joke was that it was nice to see the Mendel supporting an "emerging artist" with such a large solo show, but this work is no worse than much I've seen in the Mendel, and coincidentally — or appropriately, use your blue pencil as you will — the side gallery that Mitchell occupies is the same space that over the past few years has seen a spate of programming that featured several artists who were obviously not ready

for a solo show, a fact that came to light in the poor, unresolved quality of their work, or in the farce that was their final installation. And if we want to talk about celebrity, perhaps it's not accidental that *Green Flag Song* follows the RBC Painting Competition here: if we want pretension and poorly executed work, with a significant "star" quality (two articles in the *Globe and Mail*). Related statements were very erudite; a pity they seemed to have no connection to the works.

**A community-oriented gallery has many groups that are stakeholders, including the aforementioned politicians, artists in the community (in their many different groups and divisions), and the community at large. Often times they are at odds.**

As I said at the beginning, what is in the gallery is only part of this story: gallery spaces and who stands up for "culture" are all interconnected. Robert Labossiere was at AKA Gallery this past fall with *Decentre*, an anthology of writings on the history of Artist Run Centres in Canada, and its tone was more sure, more self-congratulatory in asserting "relevance" to the Canadian landscape, than anything I see in *Green Flag Song* (or perhaps Mitchell is being interpolated as "privileged," since many feel that she was given something, in her first exhibition here, that she didn't merit). But to quote Dan Ring, Chief Curator at the Mendel, when you receive nearly a million dollars from the City of Saskatoon, they are a stakeholder and a gatekeeper. This has pushed the Mendel to be more accountable and more widely



Installation view of *Green Flag Song*, 2006, by Joni Mitchell. Photo: Eve Kotyk. Courtesy: Mendel Art Gallery.

relevant than a lot of the past (and present) regimes we've seen at ARCs in this city — and these spaces also receive public money. So who gets to throw stones here, in questioning curatorial or institutional integrity, is muddy, muddy grey. Yet these spaces have been some of the ones loudest in decrying the Mendel's "selling out," while never having to answer to the same rules: if AKA or PAVED arts had to justify funding to some of the members of the Saskatoon City Council, their voices might not be so shrill and condemning of *Green Flag Song*.

This "comparison" that I raise is somewhat skewed as the attendance numbers that the Mendel has clocked for Mitchell are already off the scale (a formidable weapon in this time of funding cuts). PAVED arts has a strong role in its workshops and networking with the emergent and vibrant Aboriginal community here, but looking at its recent exhibitions, one might wish that it focused solely on workshops and community. Faith Moosang showed at PAVED last year, and I mention her here, as her process with the works exhibited in one of the PROOF exhibitions at Gallery 44, and later in a solo show at PAVED, is echoed by Mitchell's.

But when I mention this to people here, even those within the cultural community, no one remembers it, and this is an ugly yet necessary point to make: that more people will see Mitchell's work than Moosang's is something that speaks not only to the issue of accessibility, but also to the fact that community spaces like the Mendel understand that many cultured, intelligent people will not enter an art gallery at the end of a gun. If the name of a pop star gets people in to see works by emerging Saskatchewan artists in *Flatlanders*, or *Sons of a Lost River* by Neil McLeod, it's a good thing. Funding is an elusive beast and most people in Canada (Canada Council, I'm talking to you here) still can't spell the province's name, despite the fact that we are an island of stability in the economic storm currently hitting this country.

I'll come to a simple point: *Green Flag Song* is fairly good work, far better than what Mitchell displayed before, and better than some of the works I've seen by people who aren't "touristing," as I think I would describe her previous endeavour here, years ago. But that's a dangerous word. Does one describe a pop star who paints as a "tourist,"

but not tenured faculty who use the space to drop an unresolved and unengaging work? Is it "touristing" to re-write Yeats, but not "touristing" to treat a solo show here — a much-coveted opportunity, for many — as one's right to drop a work that is unfinished and irrelevant, and then smugly invoke that magic postmodernist word "process" as an escape hatch? Is it "touristing" to pretend to be an activist with one's practice, citing all the appropriate names, and yet deny one's privilege and power?

Sorry, I'm not answering any questions here. I've already had my integrity questioned in my community for admitting I like the work, and not falling in line with the dogma. *Green Flag Song* won't be showing anywhere else in the country, which is too bad; one can hope for a catalogue, as this may be the first time I've considered Joni Mitchell a visual artist. □

BART GAZZOLA is the visual arts critic for Planet S Magazine, and the host/producer of The A Word, on CFRC 90.5 FM/cfcr.ca, and teaches Digital Imagery at the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon.



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## SONGS OF THE SELF: Slightly Unbalanced

Museum London • 6 December, 2008 – 22 February, 2009

Organized and curated by Independent Curators International

REVIEW BY Matthew Ryan Smith

Upon entering the expansive second floor of Museum London, I am confronted by an audible host of stifled cries and one brazen proclamation of the self — “I Sean Landers exist ... I have great love for you.” The exhibition space contains a mix of mediums from painting and video, to sculpture and installation. Immediately to the left of the entrance sits the compulsive, diaristic itinerary of Danica Phelps’s Artist Collector Curator Spy, a document of the banality of the everyday, with entries ranging from “CRAMPS” to “watching X-Files.” Photographed panels of tattered bears and ambiguous insects from Mike Kelley’s *Ahh ... Youth!* are visible beyond a dividing wall — a teenage photograph of the artist, acne and all, rests in fitting proximity on the fifth of eight panels, between a pink bunny rabbit and an asexual, homemade plush toy. At eye level to the right, David Shrigley’s photographed fragment of a studio space sports the inscription “ANTI-DEPRESSANTS” on a large white bucket, reinforcing the stereotypical perception of the tragic artist figure. Immersed in this climate of emotional fragility, it seems rather fitting and ironic that the watchful eye of a security guard looms behind.

Slightly Unbalanced explores neurosis and other psychological states of being. Splin-

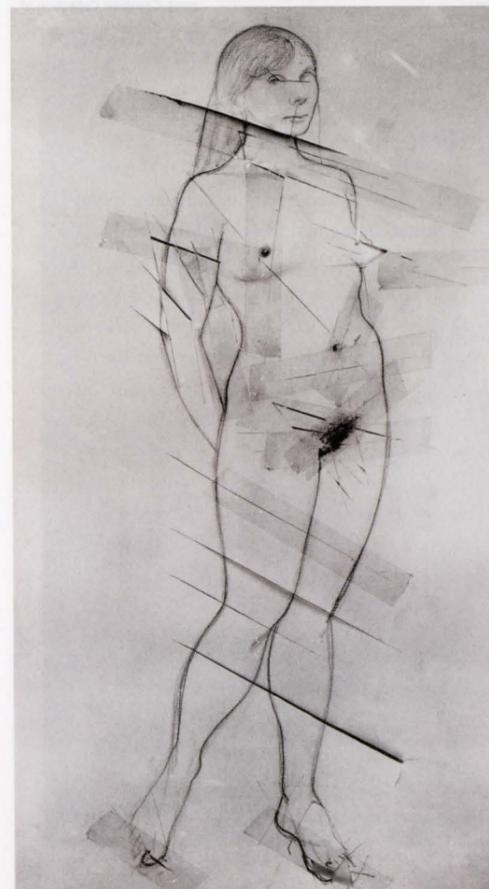
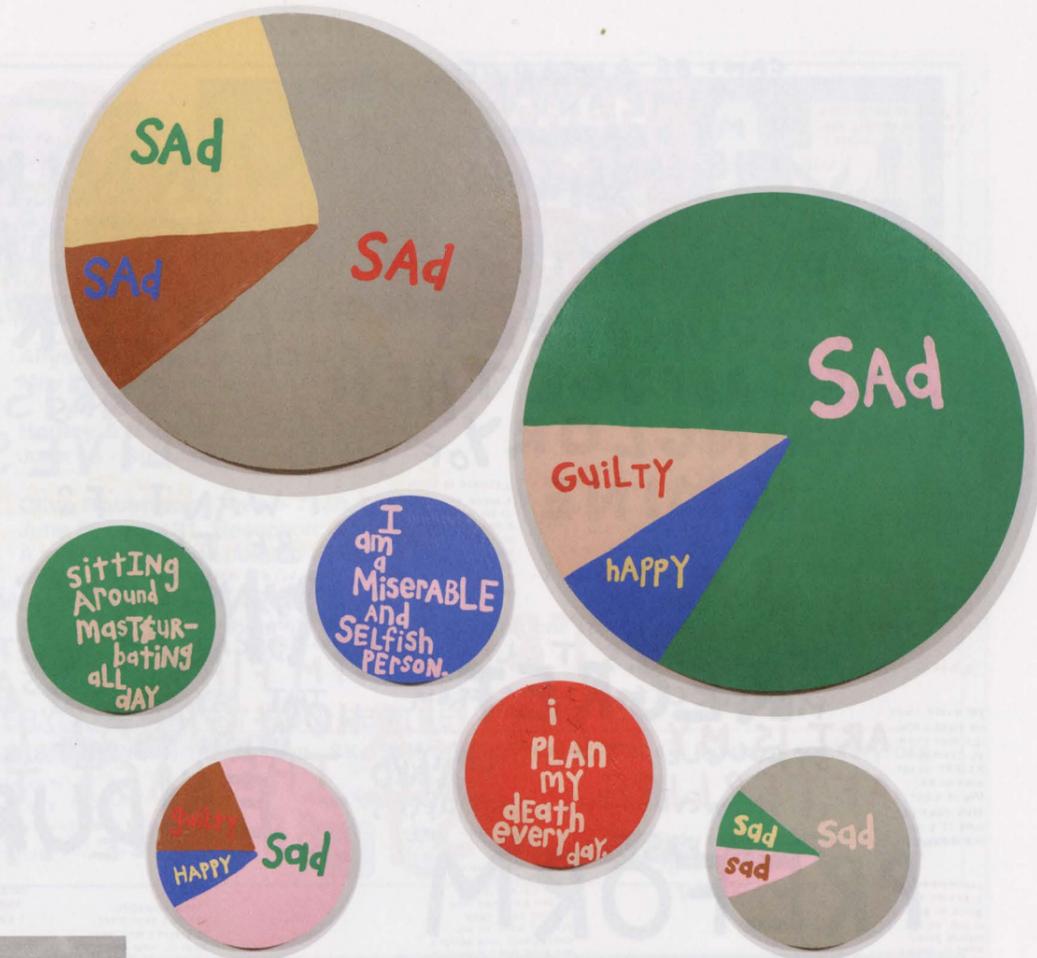
tered into four categories— Progenitors, Performance Video, Inner Monologues, and The House as Metaphor for the Mind — the artists confront, challenge and articulate the nuances of emotional disorder(s) through autobiographical, confessional and diaristic modes of communication. Besides inflating the common presumption of the artist as someone who compromises psychological stability for their work, the artists in this exhibition draw attention to the vulnerability of the artist’s psyche and neurotic tendencies that are so readily assumed to accompany artistic production and creativity.<sup>1</sup>

Works by Bruce Nauman, Sophie Calle, Mike Kelley, Louise Bourgeois and Cindy Sherman headline Progenitors. Sophie Calle’s poignant (and only) contribution to the exhibition, a three-part piece entitled *Autobiographies*, is composed of three large panels separated by didactic text. The second, rather disconcerting segment, *The Razor Blade*, is an idealized sketch of a standing nude female slashed repeatedly from head to toe with the cuts concentrated in the genital area. Calle reports that, after posing for a life drawing class, a male student charged at his drawings upon completion, submitting the paper to the swipes of the blade. It is here that Calle reveals the precariousness not only of her own being but also of another’s,

suggesting neurotic tendencies that accompany even the “weekend” artist. Opposite Calle, one finds Bruce Nauman’s installation *Get Out of My Mind, Get Out of This Room* from 1968. Eerie sepia-toned light from a single low-watt light bulb floods the space while Nauman repeatedly murmurs, “get-out-of-this-room.” Centering oneself in the space, the viewer is inundated by a breadth of voices streaming from embedded speakers in the walls; the experience is akin to a schizophrenic state, one which deceives the senses, stretches reality and cultivates the seeds of paranoia.

In an era of reality television, blogging, social networking websites and tabloid magazines, it is not surprising that artists have adapted and responded to a cultural condition of autobiography. Slightly Unbalanced embodies these frameworks while complicating the notion of the artist as afflicted genius. But, considering the proliferation of anti-depressants and the popularity of rehab, not to mention the various outlets available to broadcast one’s errors and follies (Facebook, fmylife.com and PostSecret immediately come to mind), the stereotype of the idiosyncratic, tragic artist is being co-opted from all sides by an angst-ridden public, delinquent celebrities and cyberspacers. One can make the case that Slightly Unbalanced

<opposite page> Mike Kelley. *Ahh ... Youth!* (series), 1991. Courtesy: Private Collection. <this page, right> Cary Leibowitz. *Untitled (Sad Pie Graph 1) (Sad Pie Graph 2) (Sad Pie Graph 3) (Sad Pie Graph 4) I am a Miserable and Selfish Person, I Plan My Death Every Day*, 1990 – 1991. Courtesy: Alexander Gray Associates. <bottom left> Sophie Calle. *Autobiographies (The Razor Blade)*, 1988. Courtesy: Collection of James and Joanne Murphy. <bottom right> Sarah Hobbs. *Periodic Table of the Traits*, 2006. Courtesy: the artist and Solomon Projects.



### Periodic Table Of The Traits

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## HOW TO FIGHT A CANADIAN CORPORATE MINING PREDATOR...

### AND WIN:

*Malcolm Rogge's Under Rich Earth*

Produced and directed by

Malcolm Rogge • 2008

REVIEW BY Edwin Janzen

In 1996, a Japanese mining company discovered rich copper deposits under Ecuador's remote Intag Valley. Fearing that mining development would result in the loss of their livelihoods, local coffee and sugarcane farmers burned down the mining camp and expelled the company from the valley. But in the last few years, Canadian and US investors again became interested in mining the Intag Valley's riches, which set the stage for another conflict — and for *Under Rich Earth*, a feature-length documentary by Toronto filmmaker Malcolm Rogge.

*Under Rich Earth*, which premiered at the 2008 Toronto International Film Festival, is the story of how the people of Junin, a community in the Intag Valley, resisted and organized against the advances of Ascendant Copper, a Toronto-based mining corporation. Rogge skillfully pieces together his narrative, interweaving interviews with farmers, ranchers and activists with scenes of the local people at work and footage shot by local residents and human rights observers.

We soon learn about DECOIN (Ecological Defense and Conservation of Intag), an Intag Valley-based activist organization that seeks to educate the local people about mining impacts. Many residents fear a mining operation would turn their lush valley into a desert sown with lead, arsenic, cadmium and chromium pollution, and that they, unable to make a living from farming, ranching,



<top> Sign above the control post at the entrance to Junin: Mining companies prohibited. This land is not for sale. Defend our land. Photo: Malcolm Rogge, 2008. <bottom> Malcolm Rogge interviewing Polibio Pérez in the town of Apuela. Photo: Dawn Paley, 2008. Courtesy: Malcolm Rogge.

or tourism, would be forced to relocate. Rogge's sweeping images of the majestic Intag landscape are astonishing; a person would have to be crazy to leave a place of such beauty.

Rogge also interviews mining company representatives like Francisco Veintimilla, Ascendant's general manager in Ecuador, who claims confidently that DECOIN is attempting to sow fear about the impacts of mining among the valley's people "through websites and disinformation" and that in

reality "support for the project is over 85 percent." Not only will Ascendant bring jobs and development, he assures, but the company has already invested millions locally in "community development programs" that support local healthcare and education.

But as Rogge's film progresses, a different story unfolds, wherein the company employs ruthless disinformation tactics along with a "hearts and minds" campaign — an attempt to win popular support by offering a few incentives to the local population. In inter-



<clockwise from top left> Robinson Guachagmira, anti-mining activist after being beaten by pro-miners. Photo: Liz Weydt, 2008; Villagers of Barcelona showing police the tear gas canisters fired by paramilitary. Photo: Robinson Guachagmira, 2008; President of the Cotachaci Community Assembly attending a preview screening. Photo: Dawn Paley, 2008; Sign on tree at the entrance to Junin: Mining companies prohibited. Photo: Malcolm Rogge, 2008. All photos courtesy of Malcolm Rogge.

views, some Junin residents disparage Ascendant's laughable efforts to solicit people's support. "We are very familiar with their so-called community relations," one farmer grins. "Just imagine, they came to Junin about eight days ago to give us chickens. But we already have chickens!"

But things get more serious when the company, anticipating a change in government and eager to establish its presence "on the ground," turns to extreme measures. *Under Rich Earth* reaches its climax with a standoff in which villagers confront and attempt to arrest a numerically superior paramilitary force armed with firearms, tear gas and attack dogs. The company "hitmen," mostly ordinary Ecuadorean country boys led by some ex-army security professionals, had been sent into the valley to establish an Ascendant Copper company outpost. Following the standoff, the villagers wage and win a media-relations battle to convince the politicians and police to take action. The viewer leaves contemplating luck, counting the number of

things that could have gone wrong for the people of Junin.

Those Canadians accustomed to thinking of their country as a mild-mannered, peacekeeping "good guy" in the community of nations need to watch more films like *Under Rich Earth*. The story of US political, economic and military interventions in Latin America has by now been told again and again — but in fact, Canada has long acted as a shotgun rider for British and American colonial policies in the region. Canadian banking corporations, for example, dominated finance in the British Caribbean for decades.

To be sure, many are outraged by reports of dirty-dealing Canadian companies like Talisman in the Sudan, or the crimes of Canadian troops in Somalia. But there is a broader sense that such stories are exceptional cases. In fact, dozens of Canadian mining corporations have global reach that impacts on people and environments in the world's most far-flung corners. Moreover, Canadian tax dollars underwrite these corporate

predators through Export Development Canada, a federal Crown Corporation that provides finance and risk-management services to Canadian exporters. *Under Rich Earth* unmasks how these global players operate in local situations.

But perhaps Rogge's most impressive achievement here is how his story gnaws through stereotypes of people as victims of corporate and army oppression. The documentary dispels such notions, revealing the people of Junin as powerful organizers taking action against mining development. May all such future encounters with mining companies end as happily as theirs. □

For more information about this and other aspects of the Canadian mining industry, visit [decoin.org](http://decoin.org) and [miningwatch.ca](http://miningwatch.ca). For the film's trailer, please go to [underrichearth.ryecinema.com](http://underrichearth.ryecinema.com).

EDWIN JANZEN is an Ottawa-based artist and writer. He is an MFA candidate in Visual Arts at the University of Ottawa.



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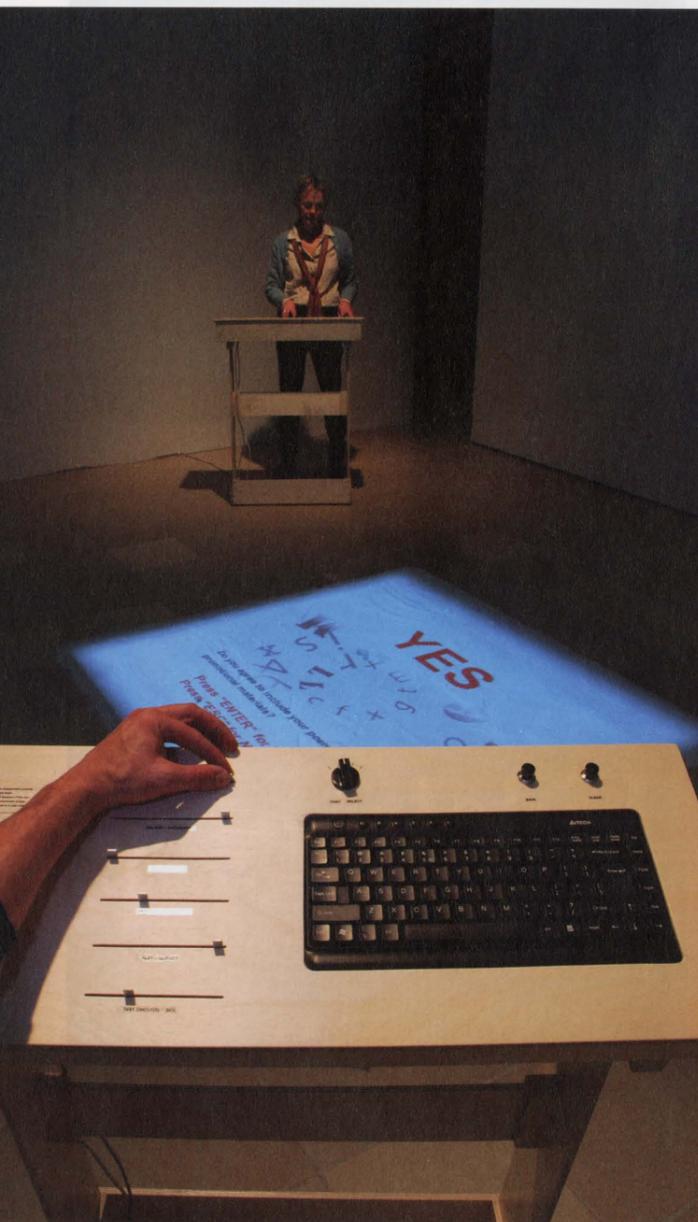
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## SOUNDING CAPACITIES FOR CO-CREATION:

### Ellen Moffat's *COMP\_OSE*

College Gallery, University of Saskatchewan • 23 October – 19 December, 2008

REVIEW BY Marie Lovrod



Ellen Moffat. *twicescore*, 2008. Photo: Clark Ferguson. Courtesy: the artist.

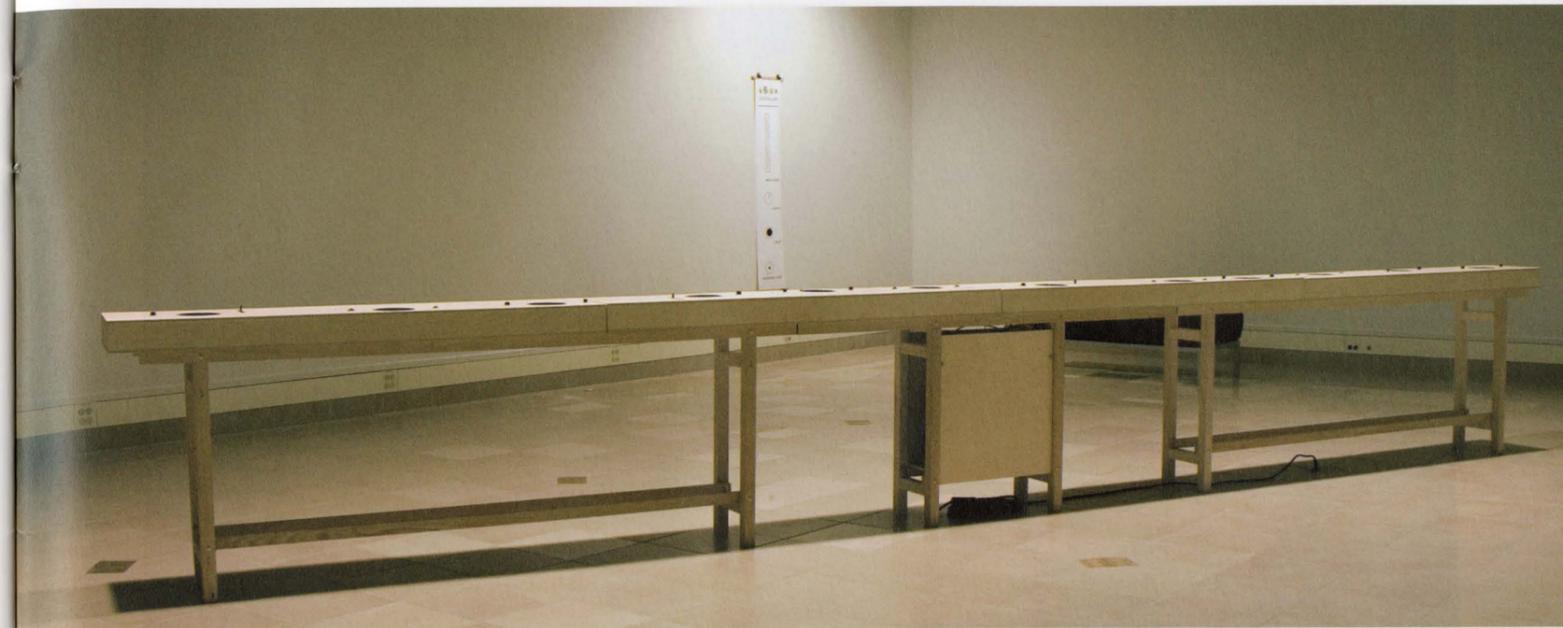
Ellen Moffat's *COMP\_OSE* treats the gallery space as a site of relational consciousness that invites people in to form and dissolve associations, breaking through the common experience of passively receiving art by interacting with and manipulating two machines: *vBox*, a multi-track vocal instrument that offers granular and linguistic sounds to approximate language; and *twicescore*, a catalyst for producing and projecting collaborative concrete poetry. Moffat's project seeks to establish new ways of engaging with art and others, where tentative reluctance, curious play and assertive interventions are all allowed. Through explorations of voice, alterity, subjectivity and possibilities for collectivity, these works challenge and interrogate received power dynamics.

#### **vBox**

On the afternoon I arrive, the gallery space opens into a subtly lit and sibilant environment, where a soft-shoe dance score of beatbox sounds and conversationally toned rhythms invites audience members to take a step closer, turn a knob, push a button, press a slide, see what happens when a room of friends and strangers, or maybe just one or two curious visitors choose to use the multi-stationed vocal instrument. On the rear wall, a legend maps ways to vary and manipulate the available ranges of sounds along axes of volume, durational elements, tempo and pitch. Some seek out and consult this guide, while others miss it entirely as each discerns how s/he wants to approach and take up the installation.

#### **twicescore**

At the far end of the first gallery, a simple corner doorway opens into a room where visitor voices become the primary sound source in what appears to be a visual and cognitive game. The sound play that characterized the previous space recedes to a background murmur as one advances into the new setting. On the floor, a brightly lit screen of granular glass beads forms a sand-like square matrix etched with the shadowed impression of footprints and fingers trailed lightly over it. This luminescent surface captures projections generated by a pair of diagonally situated stations, each outfitted with standard computer keyboards, and slider scales and knobs that allow visitors to select the size, colour, spacing, font and case of characters and signs. Each mark, symbol, or message emerges into a circular pattern shaped into a concrete poem patterned after "zuverspaecteterandfigurinnemmenswert ollos" (1962), by Ferdinand Kriwet. Participants have the option to complete, title and "save" their poems



Ellen Moffat. *vBox*, 2008. Photo: Kent Archer. Courtesy: the artist.

to an archival website that "remembers" and imagines a wider or shared public for their work (see [www.twicescore.ellenmoffat.ca/](http://www.twicescore.ellenmoffat.ca/)).

Together, the spaces created by these installations summon notions of de-centered, yet sensuously place-bound, forms of shared consciousness. Moffat often uses the spatialization of sound and the fragmentation of language in multimedia installations in gallery and other public spaces to create intricate explorations with audience members and to facilitate renegotiated communicative practices and social relations. Her growing body of work, where she is always searching for localized transformational grammars of connective and disruptive rhythms, draws on her experiences of the cognitive deteriorations precipitated by her father's loss of language in aging. Here she inquires about basic structures of communication and the creative potentials of chance associations.

While drawing on the personal, this work is not transparently autobiographical; I know about Ellen's father because I asked. Indeed, audience members bring their own associations to the fragmented possibilities offered, and as I tune into conversations around me, I hear both personal and political meanings emerge as visitors engage with the works. For some, there is a hushed sense of the sacred in the simple suggestion of co-creativity, an association perhaps invited by the soft lighting, the scale of sound and space, though others would find the context entirely secular. The technology here operates in service to a creative technique that is subtle and powerful; at each moment that an imagined message is heard or missed, wider social, political and imaginative grammars become visible and audible.

Thus, Moffat extends from the personal to advance play with the possibilities of socio-political realities in art. By breaking com-

munication down into its most elemental phonemes and signs, she disposes of polemic content, and invites practice with the possibilities of subjective expression and relationship. Incompletion is built in. There is no "correct" way to approach, view or engage with the space or other audience members; there is only a matrix of possibilities posited by each machine. The work thus seeks to resist authoritative surveillance, discipline or definition. Instead, sound, vision and movement become nodes of personal exploration and interpersonal connection in spontaneous processes that require decisions about participating or not. Even a refusal to participate, a choice simply to observe, renders the visitor part of the ever-changing field of possibilities constructed by each technological tableau. Speculation is invited, yet this project is not a spectacle. The scale is human, intimate, the questions and potentials posed, perceived, or provoked *in situ*.

There is a mindful sort of anarchy that operates in Moffat's project. Even the title of the show, which inserts an interpretive space in a word that might have been more conventionally broken between consonants, resists final decoding. Reduced to its constituent elements or reconfigured to a wider scope of actualizations, the world invites and exceeds our interpretive powers and received frameworks. More is possible than any received system imagines; so Moffat invites us to show up and *COMP\_OSE*. □

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Stephanie McNair. *Set for Life*, 2009. Courtesy: the artist and Emily Jones.

## STAKING OUT TERRITORY: Stephanie McNair, *Set for Life*

Khyber Institute of Contemporary Art • 19 – 27 February, 2009

REVIEW BY Sue Carter Flinn

On Barrington Street in downtown Halifax, numerous storefront windows — former pool halls, offices, bars, shops — are empty and lined with brown paper, victims of a panicked economy and a slow-moving developer who has purchased several blocks' worth of valuable real estate.

For years, the three-floor Khyber building, with its red brick façade and street-facing turret, overlooked Barrington like a Victorian lord of the manor. Since 1997, the Khyber Arts Society (KAS) ruled most of the city-owned building with two floors of galleries, studios and alternative perfor-

mance spaces, as well as the Khyber Club, the notoriously popular bar and performance venue. That is, up until 2005 when the city amended its lease with a financially struggling KAS, reducing their space to the large Ballroom Gallery and an administrative office. It was a disheartening blow to the arts community. Meanwhile, as the city-funded building feasibility studies continue, the bar stools in the empty main-floor Khyber Club gather dust.

Khyber administrative staff have committed most of their resources over the past couple of years to negotiating space and rent issues

with city staff — basically justifying their value to the community — and the uncertainty has taken its toll. During the day, the building, an eerily quiet shell of its former self, has a ghostly presence, like a cleaned-up version of Miss Havisham's house. It's the last place you'd expect to find an artist-in-residence, actually living *in* the gallery.

In *Set for Life*, a cheeky play on the popular scratch-and-win lottery, performance artist Stephanie McNair set up house inside the artist-run centre's Ballroom Gallery for several weeks. It was the ultimate win-win situation: the Khyber needed a replacement short-term program after they lost a funding source, and McNair, plus her calico cat and energetic young dog, needed a place to live for a couple of weeks.

McNair, a gallery preparator and set designer, had conceived of the idea years before while working at the Beaverbrook Art Gallery — as a performance piece, and definitely not out of necessity. As she would before any exhibition (or moving into an apartment, for that matter), McNair meticulously



Stephanie McNair. *Set for Life*, 2009. <top left and right> Photo: Sean Flinn. Courtesy: Sue Carter Flinn. <bottom left> Photo: Scott Blackburn.

cleaned the room's gorgeous, tall mouldings and columns, and painted the walls, before moving in all her possessions. This is a familiar ritual for McNair, who loves empty gallery spaces right before installation begins.

Imaginary dividers, created with spotlights, define the fully outfitted kitchen, bedroom and living areas. Queen blasts frequently from a boombox. McNair's costumes — she's a popular burlesque performer and drag king — hang on a wall, while her everyday clothes are outside the gallery, in the hallway. A towel, toothbrush and toothpaste are housed atop a plinth. Perhaps it could be considered a nod to Rauschenberg, or a walking talking extension of Swintak's *The thing that won't let you walk away*, the 2005 assemblage which recreated the floor — dust bunnies, underwear and all — of a young artist's bedroom around the doorframe of the AGO's gift shop.

McNair isn't the first artist to live under observation for an extended period of time. What made this mutual exchange vital and created some tension is that McNair really

needed a place to live. *Set for Life* curator Emily Jones says, "I think that the artist has had an innocent way of simply plopping herself into a new space, but then, by doing so, she drew attention to all sorts of bigger issues... She's been lighthearted about the whole thing, which is a huge breath of fresh air, especially given the Khyber atmosphere of recent years. It's such a relief!"

Jones notes that doing the performance at the Khyber feels "riskier and more relevant than it would at one of the other galleries in town because of the nature of the Khyber's relationship with its landlord, the municipal government, as well as because of the neighbouring businesses and the illegality of squatting." And although the Khyber has a long history of late-night parties, art making and performances, indeed, it feels like an illicit move when Billie, McNair's dog, innocently scampers up the stairs towards the old Turret Room, another empty space.

Over the past couple of years, while KAS staff have been forced to spend more time in meetings negotiating with city staff than in

artistic programming (let alone all the usual administrative duties), Halifax's central-to-north end has blossomed. Like other arts spaces, neighbouring Eyelevel Gallery moved away to Gottingen Street where the Roberts Street Social Centre and most of the city's lively alternative spaces are located within a few blocks of each other. Many artists, like McNair, don't spend much time downtown. But the Khyber remains definitely a downtown institution, and McNair's presence serves as a reminder of a vibrant past, and of a not-yet-doomed future. While it was a small gesture that went unnoticed by most of the city, Jones's suggestion that *Set for Life* "is partly about 'staking out' the artists' territory" reflects a battle yet to be won. □

SUE CARTER FLINN is Arts Editor for The Coast and Editor for Visual Arts News, Atlantic Canada's visual art magazine. She won a 2007 Atlantic Journalism Award for her profile on photographer George Steeves, and is nominated again this year.

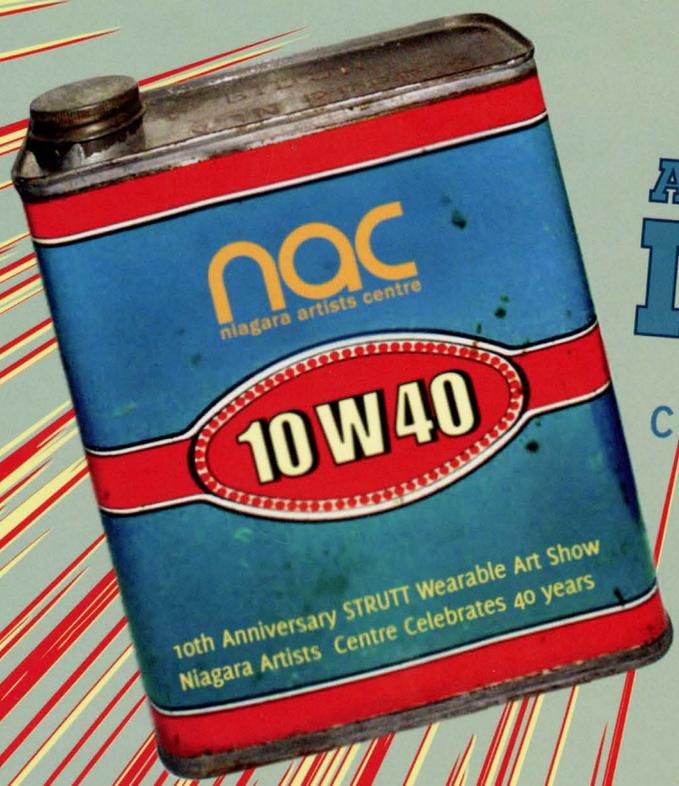


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