

fuse

art culture politics

Jen Budney captures the popular imagination,
Kirsty Robertson reflects on living as a left-wing
pinko kook, and J.J. Kegan McFadden pictures
the next 500 years in Winnipeg

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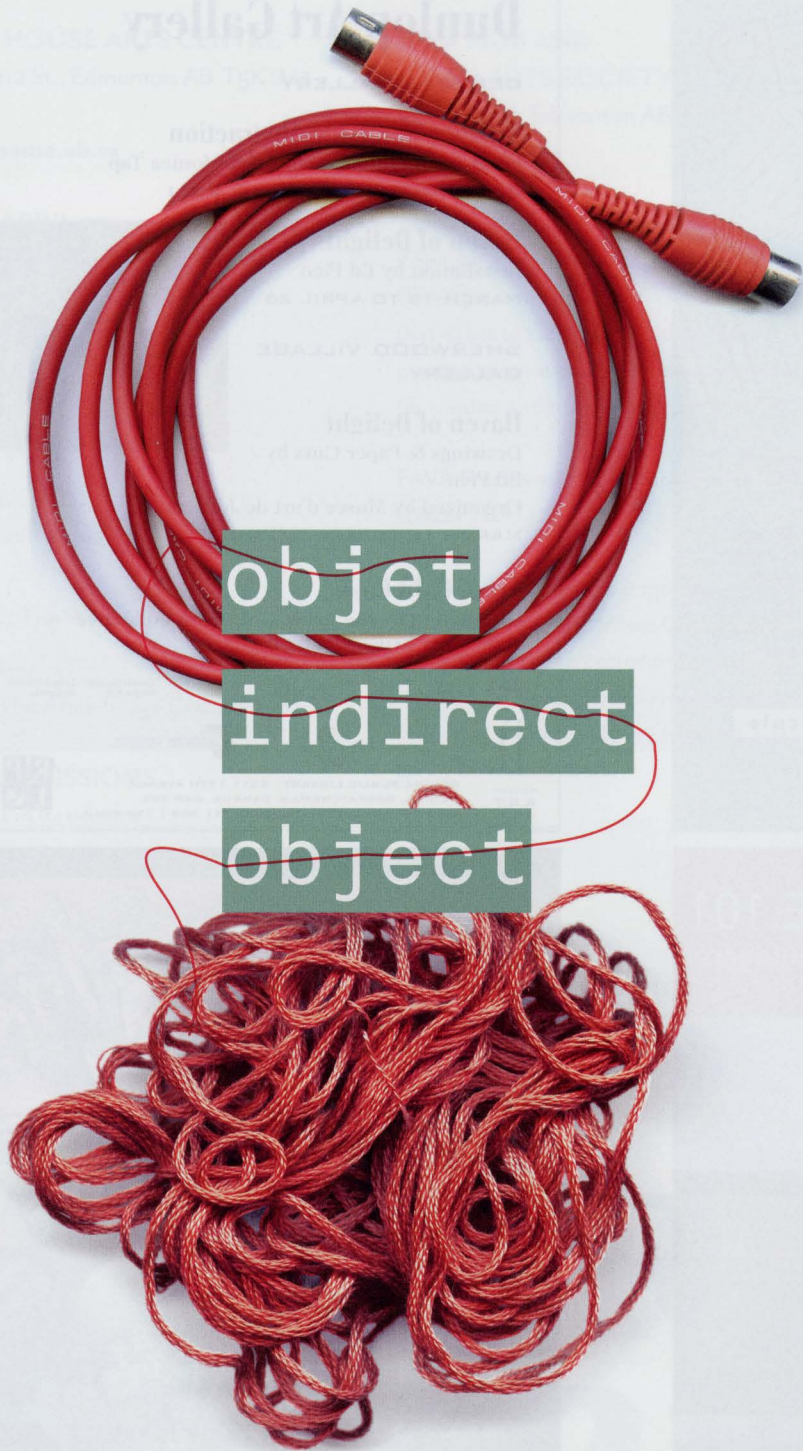
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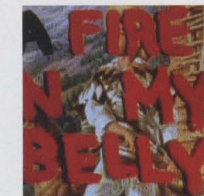


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34.2 content



INTERVIEW



FEATURE



ARTIST PROJECTS

REVIEWS



CARTOON

09 Editorial

10 What We Can Learn from Populism
BY JEN BUDNEY

16 The Stars are Aligning Themselves, in Winnipeg
BY J.J. KEGAN MCFADDEN

20 The Museum Formerly Known as Centre A: Jesse McKee
in conversation with Hank Bull, Makiko Hara, Debra
Zhou and Jinhan Koh

26 Dancing Mounties, Flamingo Pink Jackets, Culture
and Elitism
BY KIRSTY ROBERTSON

32 Never Been to Tehran
ORGANIZED BY ANDREA GROVER AND JON RUBIN

34 Double Feature: Darryl Nepinak
and Jackie Traverse
REVIEW BY ANDREW HARWOOD AND JONAH CORNE



37 Dirty deeds: PopSex!
REVIEW BY AMY FUNG

40 Walla Walla Bing Bang: Michael Dudeck's
Amygdala
REVIEW BY STEVEN LEYDEN COCHRANE



42 Bridging Contexts: Crossings / Traversée
REVIEW BY JULIE FIALA

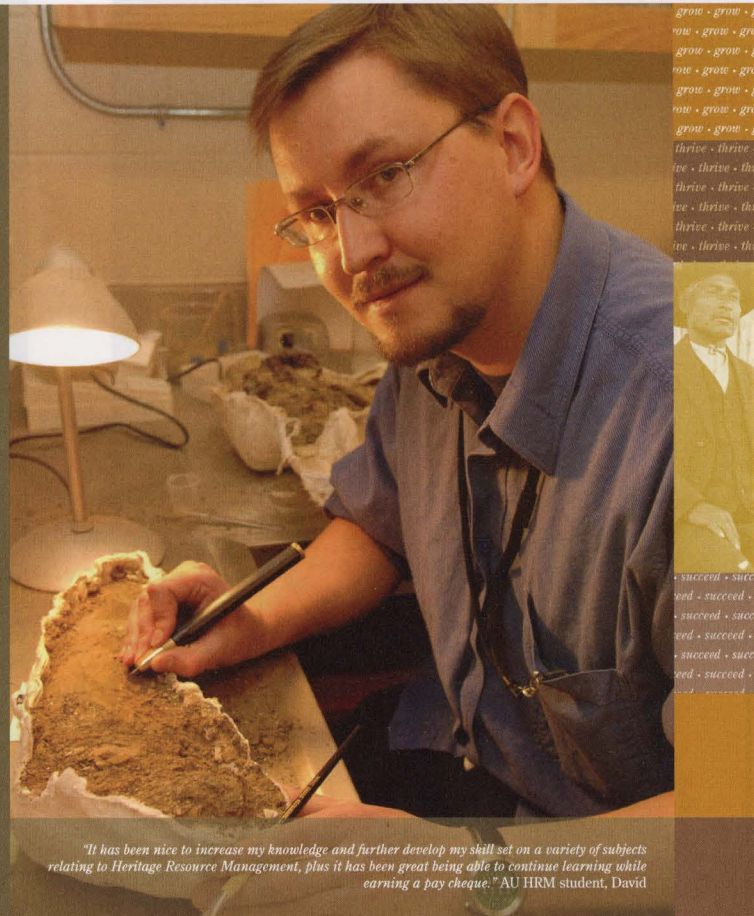
46 The Pinky Show

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THE FUTURE + THE BOTTOM-UP CIRCULATION OF MYTHS

Populist politics are the subject of much debate as people at different ends of the political spectrum try to capture the popular imagination. The role of art and artists in this debate is one of the central concerns of this issue of Fuse. As many thinkers move away from models that prioritize deconstruction in search of overarching progressive social narratives that appeal to broader audiences — especially in this time of active democratic and citizen-led movements — we consider the importance of emancipatory myths, politics that appeal to the imagination and possibilities for constructing after many years of deconstructing.

In *What We Can Learn from Populism*, Mendel curator Jen Budney asks how we can make contemporary art hold greater appeal to the popular imagination, without resorting to the spectacle of blockbusters or the neo-liberal “shuffling of signs” that writers like Julian Stallabrass criticize. Challenging the ways the term populist can be used to dismiss a set of politics that have broad appeal, Budney considers the role of storytelling and politics in creating a populist imagination, and asks how contemporary art can facilitate the bottom-up circulation of emancipatory myths, propose innovative alternatives and build a narrative structure that can affect progressive change.

In a related article, Kirsty Robertson considers how the relationship between the arts, creative industries, economics and ideology have shifted over the past few years. Working to unpack how the accusation of elitism has been used to undermine everything from arts funding to environmental protections, she considers the negative impact that these accusations have on critical response from those very communities that are called elitist. Robertson observes that the Harper government has effectively created an essential tension between the consumers of culture (populist) and producers (elitist), and warns producers against the “freedoms” associated with neoliberal culturepreneurial citizenship.

Also in this issue, Jesse McKee interviews the folks at Vancouver’s Centre A about the future, as they mark their 10th anniversary as a producing and presenting institution and reflect on *The Dig*, a recent exhibition that served as an inadvertent archive of their operations. In *The Stars are Aligning Themselves in Winnipeg*, JJ Kegan McFadden reports back from *Close Encounters: The Next 500 Years*. Hoping that this “fabulous amalgamation of contemplative, well executed, dreamy art” does not mean a future biennial in Winnipeg, McFadden considers Winnipeg’s position in the centre of the universe (or at least the centre of Canada), the success of the exhibition and what this means for the rehabilitation of Manitoba Hydro’s image.

And, thinking about the future, I am happy/sad to say that this is my last issue as editor of Fuse. An incredible collective project, Fuse has been providing critical analysis and engagement since 1978 — with hundreds of talented people contributing to the magazine as writers, editors, staff and members of the board. I am honoured to have been part of this important project, and have learned a great deal during my years here. I am very excited to see the magazine in its future incarnations.

Izida Zorde

Wu Ming Foundation, “Wu Ming’s digital portrait, set of,” Courtesy: Wu Ming Foundation



What we can learn from POPULISM

by Jen Budney



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NIFCA, the Nordic Institute for Contemporary Art, was marvelously prescient in 2005 when it organized *Populism*, a touring exhibition that explored connections between the art system and populist ideology.

One of the curators' central theses was that "the field of visual art since the late 1980s has become more and more 'populist' (and popular) in Western cultural production, as a phenomenon around which mass audiences are organized and identities are branded." [1] According to some critics, during the six years that have passed since the *Populism* exhibition, populism's influence on the arts has become even more pronounced — and more menacing. Cuts to government arts funding and necessary corporate sponsorships have contributed to a situation in which museums are seen to cater to the masses with so-called blockbuster exhibitions (e.g. *Marilyn Monroe: Life as Legend*, hosted by Calgary's Glenbow Museum in 2009). Other critics argue that blockbusters aren't the issue; the problem is the very function of the art world. British critic Julian Stallabrass says it doesn't really matter what people make in a neoliberal economic system: the specific content of the "on principle useless and inconsequential shuffling of signs that the art world produces [...]" is less important than its overall operation and the role it plays in dramatizing, making spectacular, fantasizing about and finally sanctioning the functional shuffling of signs, bodies, artefacts and genes in commerce." [2]

Most people working in the art world loathe to take their critique as far as Stallabrass's, because of its negative implications for the

Wu Ming Foundation, "Wu Ming's official portrait, sort of." Courtesy: Wu Ming Foundation.



David Wojnarowicz, *A Fire In My Belly* (Film In Progress), 1986-87. Courtesy of The Estate of David Wojnarowicz and P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York and The Fales Library and Special Collections/ New York University.

What kind of crisis might inspire Canadian art museums to make full use of the internet and other “new” media, which we are currently embracing at a snail’s pace?

work they do. As artists, curators, educators and critics, we believe our vocations are important, and typically view them as contributing to positive cultural, social and political change. Yet the words “populism” and “populist” are dirty. Indeed, in public art galleries, even a director’s instruction to create shows of “broad appeal” makes most curators extremely nervous — the term is seen as code for “sell-out” or “dumb.” Meanwhile, lower than desired participation in museums and limited public understanding of or support for the arts, has galleries scrambling to increase attendance. There is a seemingly irresolvable

tension in our organizations between wanting to affect change in the so-called real world and the forms and languages of our profession’s critical discourses, and the traditions of our institutions, about which many citizens could not care less.

Issue number 20 of *OPEN*, the European “cahier on art and the public domain,” produced twice yearly by the Netherlands foundation SKOR through NAI Publishers, is titled *The Populist Imagination: On the Role of Myth, Storytelling, and Imaginary in Politics*. Guest edited by Merijn Oudenampsen, a

young researcher formerly affiliated with the Jan van Eyck Academy in Maastricht, *OPEN* 20 provides a nuanced and motivating alternative to the usual critiques of populism offered by the Left. Oudenampsen organized the issue with a mind to countering what he sees as a prevalent tendency by liberals and progressives to disqualify right-wing populism as demagoguery, a penchant that, coincidentally, ran through most of the pages of *e-flux journal* #22, published just a few weeks later and also dedicated to the problem of populism. [3] Critical of the way the word “populist” is often used as a simple insult to dismiss the individuals and organizations accused of it (to wit: the guest editors of *e-flux journal* #22 titled their essay on the rise of right-wing populism “Idiot Wind”), Oudenampsen considers how the Left can learn from right-wing populist movements in Europe and the USA, explaining:

Some may have forgotten, but politics still involves imagination, the capacity to dream collectively, to tell stories; politics still contains a form of mythology. If we want to take populism seriously as a political force, we must above all consider it in the light of these aspects. At the same time, we must ask ourselves the difficult question of why our own politics no longer appeal to the imagination.[4]

Contributors to the issue of *OPEN* come mainly from nations with prominent right-wing populist movements, such as the Netherlands, whose Party for Freedom, under the leadership of Geert Wilders, campaigns against Dutch Muslims and Muslim immigrants; Italy, with its controversial Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi, and the sometimes-separatist, xenophobic and anti-immigrant Lega Nord party; and the USA, where the Tea Party movement rallies on an anti-government, anti-tax and anti-Islam agenda. Populist movements, of course, are not always right-wing, as demonstrated by the leadership of President Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, former President Lula da Silva of Brazil, and President Evo Morales in Bolivia, amongst other South

American examples. What all populist movements have in common is that they speak in the name of “the people” and position themselves as working against the establishment or “elite.” Significantly, says the Argentine political theorist Ernesto Laclau in his book *On Populist Reason*, populist discourse “attempts to make the limits of the discursive formation coincide with the limits of community.” “The people,” as constructed, is only a partial component of the political community, yet is posited as the only legitimate totality. [5] (Laclau is also interviewed for *OPEN*). Chavez did this when he said, in 2004, “This has been a great victory for the Venezuelan people,” [6] denying the equal citizenry of all opposition. Stephen Harper did the same when he claimed that “ordinary people” don’t support the arts or their “rich gala(s) all subsidized by taxpayers.” [7] The authors’ attentive exploration of the meaning of the much-banded term “populism” in *OPEN* 20 is reason enough to read the issue.

The essays, interview, and artworks in *OPEN* 20 together comprise “a plea for a more imaginative politics that emphasizes the importance of new, ‘creative’ ways of thinking,” writes the journal’s editor-in-chief, Jorinde Seijdel. [8] Given the importance of television media in contemporary politics, and the importance of the visual to the imaginary, the visual arts — in their widest definitions — are heavily implicated. Italian theorists and media activists Franco Berardi and Marco Jacquemet (co-authors, with Gianfranco Vitali, of the book *Ethereal Shadows: Communications and Power in Contemporary Italy* [9]), for instance, argue that Berlusconi’s astonishing success as a media mogul and politician can be explained by a religio-cultural mindset that developed during the Counter-Reformation and the Baroque period — and did not leave Catholic Italy when it industrialized — in which the image is divine. Today, a line can no longer be drawn between TV and political practices in la Bel Paese: Berlusconi owns the variety show he emcees. [10]

With a similar take on the USA, American sociologist Stephen Duncombe argues that

today’s media systems, with their advertising, spin doctors, and celebrity gossip, contribute to a world in which “[t]he imaginary is an integral part of reality.” He notes that the Left can no longer afford to be hard-hearted and pragmatic, content to point out the fallacies of right-wing logic: “*Realpolitik* now necessitates *dreampolitik*.” [11] Barack Obama, he argues, created a dream of “absolute emptiness” in which all sorts of different people could “curl up” and “find contentment,” but his lack of action on various fronts has dispirited many former supporters. [12] Instead, Duncombe is inspired by the work of artists such as Steve Lambert and the Yes Men, citing Lambert’s and Yes Man Andy Bichlbam’s November 2008 faux New York Times action, and Lambert’s and Packard Jennings’ poster campaign for a future San Francisco (2007) as works that create the conditions for popular political dreaming. “IRAQ WAR ENDS,” screamed the fake Times headline, while the *Greenspace* poster announced plans to turn San Francisco into a wildlife refuge. Since both the fake newspaper and the fake urban planning posters looked real but advertised impossibly ideal political scenarios, they prompted viewers to ask themselves: “Why not? How come? What if?” [13]

Yves Citton, the Swiss author of *Mythocratie. Storytelling et imaginaire de Gauche* (2010), echoes Duncombe’s call for the Left to employ the imaginary. He calls upon Spinoza to argue that politics are not a matter of rational calculation about a society’s best interests; human beings can’t help but react affectively along the “coincidental associations of our imaginations,” and this is not an individual phenomenon, but a collective one. (Thus, seeing fear in people around us usually makes us scared.) Regardless of what affect we experience, we are unlikely to act until we can integrate our possible moves within a narrative structure. According to this logic, the populist Right rejects state funding of the arts not because of a collective affect (e.g. confusion when faced with unfamiliar or difficult images, forms, and practices), but because of the narrative structure created around the affect (“We don’t understand contemporary art

because it's not art, it's a scam"). Rather than deride populism, he says, we should consider the following points:

1. *Populist discourses relay social pressures and tensions that are accurately perceived (but insufficiently articulated) by large segments of the multitude. [...]*
2. *It is not sufficient to attack populist myths with accurate facts and rational arguments: (reactionary) myths need to be overcome by (emancipatory) myths. [...]*
3. *In order to distinguish emancipatory myths from reactionary ones, it is less important to measure how "mythical" they are than to consider in which direction they push our collective development. [...]*
4. *Emancipatory myths best emerge from a media structure that favours a bottom-up circulation of myths, fuelled by a well-rounded circulation of information and knowledge. [14]*

Citton's fourth point has obvious implications for the arts on a policy level, including the importance of open access, net neutrality, state funding for arts education in public schools, no or low participation fees (or targeted subsidies) for audiences of professional art productions, low or free tuitions to post-secondary liberal arts, humanities, and fine arts programs, and so forth.

The Italian writers' collective Wu Ming, on the other hand, cautions artists against attempting to implement new myths with a heavy hand. Wu Ming recounts its own experience as organizer of the Luther Blissett Project, or LBP (1994-1999) in which hundreds of people across Italy and around the world adopted the name Luther Blissett as author of their politically directed media hoaxes, radio programs, fanzines, videos, street theatre, performance art, and theoretical writings. The LBP was inspired in part by the imaginaries of the Zapatistas ("those media-savvy poetic warriors who had seemingly appeared out of nowhere" [15]), and followed in a short but fascinating tradition of multiple use names, including Nikolas Bourbaki, the nom de plume of a group of mostly French mathematicians, which formed in 1935; Alan

Smithee, the name used, since 1968, by Hollywood directors attempting to disavow credit for a film over which they feel they lost creative control; and, in the art world, Geoffrey Cohen, Monty Cantsin, Karin Eliot and Rose Sélavy. In Bologna, Luther Blissett wrote an historical novel, *Q*, which dealt on the surface with the 16th-century Protestant Reformation movements. But most people interpreted *Q* as an allegory of European society after the decline of the protest movements in the 1960s and 1970s. Wu Ming explains that the book's protagonist, Thomas Müntzer, developed a cult following after the "Battle of Seattle" in 1999, during protests at Prague's IMF/WB joint meeting in 2000, and at the G8 summit in Genoa in July 2001. What happened at the Genoa protests, says Wu Ming, was a tragedy: "not a 'military' defeat [but] a cultural catastrophe. The tragedy was not being defeated in the street. The tragedy was being defeated in the street and as a cultural wave." [16] After Genoa, there was no longer any role for the imaginary in Leftist politics, and the movement became dispirited and cynical.

In *Q*, Thomas Müntzer recounts the defeat of the Anabaptists on the plain at Frankenhäusen on May 15, 1525. Reflecting on this story in relation to its own role at Genoa, Wu Ming writes:

Thomas Müntzer spoke to us, but we couldn't understand his words. It wasn't a blessing, but a warning. It is impossible to disclaim the responsibility the Wu Ming collective had, at least in Italy. We were among the most zealous in urging people to go to Genoa, and helped to pull the movement into the ambush [...] We had underestimated the enemy, and overestimated ourselves. Clearly, something had gone wrong with the practice of "mythopoesis" or "myth-making from the bottom up" [...] [17]

On the contrary, a "genuine" approach to myths requires staying awake and being willing to listen. We have to ask questions and listen to what myths have to say, we have to study myths,

go looking for them in their territories, with humbleness and respect, without trying to capture them and forcibly bring them to our world and our present. It is a pilgrimage, not a safari. Technified myth is always "false consciousness," even when we think we're using it to good purpose. [18]

No curators contributed to either e-flux's *Idiot Wind* special issue or *OPEN's* *Populist Imagination*, which is too bad, because curators have such vested interests in this issue, given our roles in shaping or framing the interaction of people with art and the imaginary, not just in the way we work with art inside or outside spaces, but in our capacities managing or contributing to the management of art institutions. It was the late, great Stephen Weil who best articulated the potential value of museums in contemporary society in an argument that can be adapted easily to fit all visual art organizations, from the smallest artist-run centre to the MoMA. We are confused, he said, when we judge our visual art organizations on the magnitude of their resources, or the sincerity of their impulses, on evaluations of their public programming, the quality of their management, or the maintenance of their institutional continuity. Instead, worthiness must be evaluated by answering questions such as: "When the day was over, the sun had set and the crowds gone home, what had you accomplished? What difference had you made? In what ways had the world been improved? How had somebody's life been made a little better?" [19] It's not a question of "bums in seats." Yet it seems even many critics of the "bums in seats" method of evaluation can't think beyond the problem of institutional continuity. Explaining why blockbusters are not a solution for art museums, former Whitney director Maxwell Anderson argued: "The core constituency of collectors who matter, and people who are members of an art museum, want to be taught and stretched and learn [...] You may get people in the door for a motorcycle show or a 'Star Wars' show, but they don't return, and there is no residual value from their visits." [20] In this logic, audiences provide

value to art organizations, not the other way around.

As an industry, then, or a party (as it sometimes feels), we seem a tad too much like our current federal opposition, lacking an inspiring vision or the capacity to dream collectively. Our stance has become reactionary; we are most visible when we protest cuts to our funding or defend a scandal. It doesn't always feel like that, working on the inside. I, for one, find most of my work fascinating, challenging, and fun. But I bet the young politicians working inside the NDP or Liberal Party offices find their jobs enthralling and exciting too. It just looks really boring from the outside: a bunch of folks fixated on their own careers, happy to talk and fight amongst each other, and affecting very little change.

The question is, then: how can we make contemporary art hold greater appeal to the popular imagination, without resorting to the spectacle of blockbusters or simply "shuffling signs"? How can we make it more meaningful, not for its own sake, but to affect change? For too long, perhaps, contemporary art has been focused on deconstructive practices — I think here of Hennessy Youngman's very funny send up of Post-Structuralism on YouTube, where he gives it voice as a clever but ego-deflating naysayer [21] (ironic, of course, because of his clear indebtedness to the movement). How might we offer "emancipatory myths" for a broad group of people looking for alternatives? I don't think there's an easy answer, but for starters, it will require change in the way that we curators think about our work. We will likely need to move away from the individualist focus on "curatorial autonomy," which sees many good people fleeing public institutions for university galleries, where they do not tend to face public pressure or have much public impact. And to facilitate a "bottom-up circulation of myths," it would help to have more young people, people closer to the "street," employed in curatorial and public programming positions, currently dominated by baby boomers. Not only that: we need to shake up the job descriptions of those positions themselves.

Sometimes crisis can bring great change: I recall the brilliant turnaround of the Montréal artist-run centre DARE-DARE after it lost its operational funding about 10 years ago, and had to move out of a building and onto the street. What kind of crisis might inspire Canadian art museums to make full use of the internet and other "new" media, which we are currently embracing at a snail's pace? Is it possible that we have reached that crisis already, and fail to see it?

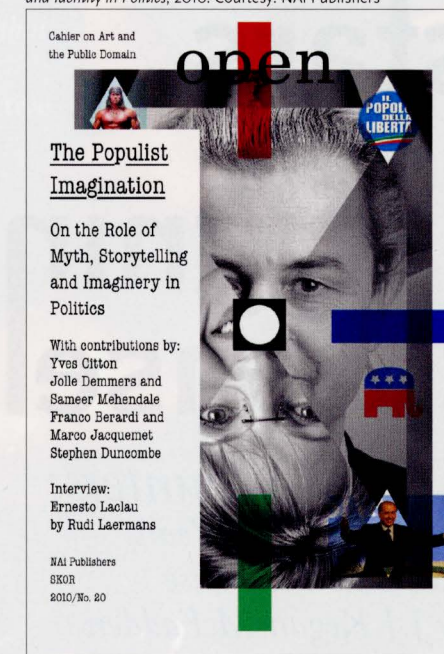
I may be accused of overstating the situation, but the Harper government, which has been called "fake populist" by some critics, displays the same attitudes and policy preferences of many far-right parties. Sure, Harper lacks the dubious charisma of, say, Berlusconi or Wilders. Yet many people believe the Conservatives will achieve a majority in the next election simply because nobody is offering an inspirational alternative. Where will we be then — artists, curators, and citizens? It will be a very lonely art world. As creative people, we ought to specialize in the invention of the imaginary. Surely then, we have a role in reinventing — or rather, re-enchanting — the Left? We just need to get where the people are, somehow, and get inside their hearts and imaginations.

JEN BUDNEY works as an associate curator at the Mendel Art Gallery in Saskatoon.

Notes

- [1] The exhibition was curated by Lars Bang Larsen, Cristina Ricupero, and Nicolaus Schafhausen, and toured to Vilnius, Oslo, Amsterdam, and Frankfurt. For more information, see: [http://www.nifca.org/2006/projects/2005/Populism.html]
- [2] Julian Stallabrass, "Types and Prospects of Radical Art," *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art*, vol. 4, no. 2, vol. 5, no. 1, 2003-4, p. 190.
- [3] See: [http://www.e-flux.com/journal]
- [4] Merijn Oudenampsen, "Political Populism: Speaking to the Imagination," *Open*, 2010/no. 20/ *The Populist Imagination*, p. 20.
- [5] Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005), p.81.
- [6] "Chavez claims referendum victory," *BBC NEWS*, 2004/08/16, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/americas/3569012.stm].
- [7] Robert Benzie, Bruce Campion Smith, and Les Whittington, "Ordinary folks don't care about the

Open 20, *The Populist Imagination: The Role of Myth, Narratives and Identity in Politics*, 2010. Courtesy: NAI Publishers



- arts: Harper," *The Star*, Sept. 24, 2008, [http://www.thestar.com/article/504811].
- [8] Jorinde Seijdel, "The Populist Imagination: On the Role of Myth, Storytelling and Imaginary in Politics," *OPEN* – 2010/ No. 20, p. 5.
- [9] Franco Berardi, Marco Jacquemet, Gianfranco Vitali, *Ethereal Shadows: Communications and Power in Contemporary Italy*, trans. Jessica Otey (New York: Autonomedia, 2009).
- [10] Franco Berardi and Marco Jacquemet, "The Italian Anomaly: Berlusconi and Semiocapitalism," *OPEN* – 2010/ no. 20, p. 40-49.
- [11] Stephen Duncombe, "Politics as the Art of the Impossible: The Case for a *Dreampolitik* in the USA," *OPEN* – 2010/ no. 20, p. 23.
- [12] *Ibid.*, p.23-25.
- [13] *Ibid.*, p.36.
- [14] Yves Citton, "Populism and the Empowering Circulation of Myths," *OPEN* – 2010/ No. 20, pp.60-69.
- [15] Wu Ming, "The Spirit of Müntzer: A Critical Consideration of Political Mythology," *OPEN* – 2010/ No. 20, p. 87.
- [16] *Ibid.*, p.104.
- [17] *Ibid.*, p. 97.
- [18] *Ibid.*, p.103.
- [19] Stephen Weil, "Beyond Management: Making Museums Matter," a paper presented at the Intercom Museums conference in 2000. [http://www.intercom.museum/conferences/2000/weil.pdf]
- [20] Robin Pogrebin, "Populism hasn't boosted Brooklyn Museum's Attendance," *New York Times*, June 14, 2010.
- [21] [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NoN1s1OkQg]

The stars are aligning themselves, in Winnipeg

Close Encounters: The Next 500 Years
Exhibition response
by J.J. Kegan McFadden

The stars are aligning themselves, in Winnipeg. Many key factors have to be considered in the development of a project such as *Close Encounters: The Next 500 Years*, a multi-venue exhibition of contemporary art by international Indigenous artists.

First of all, we're in Winnipeg: the centre of the universe, or at least of North America. Winnipeg is the Cultural Capital of Canada for 2010. The key players in *Close Encounters* are the Winnipeg Arts Council, Plug In Institute for Contemporary Art, and URBAN SHAMAN: Contemporary Aboriginal Art. Under the Directorship of Carol Phillips, the WAC was able to broker a multi-million dollar deal with the federal and municipal governments in support of the year's activities, of which *Close Encounters* is to be considered the banner project. Including the commissioning of work, multiple artist's talks, screenings and presentations, and the refurbishing of a new temporary 10,000 square-foot venue, *Close Encounters*, at the invitation of Plug In ICA Director Anthony Kiendl, is co-curated by emerging, established, mid-career, and senior curators: Jenny Western; Candice Hopkins; Steve Loft; and Lee-Ann Martin. It features work by more than 30 artists from across Canada, the United States, South America, Europe, Australia and New Zealand, working individually as well as in collectives.

Winnipeg is a labour town. We get together, stick together, work together, love together, we strike together, support one another, especially in the arts. So when an initiative like *Close Encounters* is presented, it's no wonder that additional (parallel) partners are included to round out the venues in different ways. Urban Shaman: Contemporary Aboriginal Art [1], PLATFORM Centre for Photographic and Digital Arts, Gallery 1C03 at the University of Winnipeg, La Maison des artistes visuels francophones, North End Arts Centre and Graffiti Art Programming Inc. are all participating in some component, either as presentation spaces with Aboriginal artists of their own choosing, or as satellites for workshops and other programming opportunities. As one might expect, the official exhibition spans not just Plug In ICA's main and off-site spaces, but also the WAG, Manitoba Hydro's new downtown office and the Manitoba Museum's Planetarium.

Overall this exhibition is successful, but quiet. I mean that not as a slur. I prefer quiet work. Exhibitions of this scale are usually cluttered with overgrown installations and a pissing contest of who's who and what's what, and thankfully that is not the case here. *Close Encounters* is a fabulous amalgamation of contemplative, well-executed, dreamy art that is brought together to postulate what the future might have in store for Indigenous peoples a full millennium after European-North American contact, with an emphasis on what the current state of affairs allows for in terms of political debates (natural resources, sovereignty and self-identifying/mythologizing, understanding and perpetuating, etc). There's a certain amount of work that calls upon our extra-sensory perceptions: the marvelous and almost camp sculpture by Jeffrey Gibson that he describes as something akin to a battering ram, a phallus, and/or a giant's wand; or the bejeweled painting with accompanying kaleidoscopic black and white video projection by Ruben Patterson; or the ornately and unapologeti-

"The world is at a crossroads. Now is the moment to reconfigure our notions of time to reveal alternative ways of thinking and being for the future. In *Close Encounters: The Next 500 Years*, Indigenous artists imagine the future within the context of present experiences and past histories."

— *Close Encounters* Curatorial Collective



Mary Anne Barkhouse, *The Four Horses of the Apocalypse and the Donkey of Eternal Salvation*, (detail), 2008. Photo: David Barbour.

We don't need another biennial, do we? If this train is already too fast to stop can we at least see this as a roaming two-year project that will be taken across our country, into the States and beyond?

cally sentimental pop-culture-infused video by Rosalie Favell, which documents her family's history on the Red River and was presented in the Planetarium just like a Pink Floyd laser light show. Something else that should be mentioned is that *Close Encounters* marks the Winnipeg debut of work by James Luna and Brian Jungen, among many other international artists of note. How has it taken this long to present work by Jungen in Winnipeg? For the purposes of this text, I am not interested in discussing the work at hand all that much, forgive me; I'm far more interested in the situation into which this project is born for a Winnipeg audience.

Remember, we're in Winnipeg: the murder capital of Canada[2]; a city plagued by poverty, [3] racism, and an amnesia that somehow allows us to forget how disgustingly our citizens are treated by our leaders in city council, which in turn gets reinforced by the police department, and underscored by real estate speculators who keep our downtown unlivable. [4] Winnipeg is muddy water. Which leads me to the major corporate sponsor, in addition to being the most lackluster of venues, for *Close Encounters* — Manitoba Hydro. Right. Right! Right? Does anyone else see the irony in this gesture of partnership? Manitoba Hydro has been responsible for the flooding of many First Nations and Reserves in Manitoba over the last 50 years. Despite compensation packages in the hundreds of millions (yes, millions of dollars!), there is still not adequate drinking water (not to mention access to fresh fruits and vegetables or reliable healthcare facilities) on some Manitoba First Nations. Corporate responsibility should not mean sponsoring your reputation out of the gutter and into the art gallery. What does it mean for Manitoba Hydro to sponsor an exhibition of contemporary Indigenous art? Are they continuing to buy their recovery from bad PR? Such lip service in the context of Hydro's history

of gross misconduct might make sense, if the exhibition contained any work either from communities affected by hydroelectric projects expressly or dealing with the situation in any direct way. The work that might approximate an engagement with the iconography of Hydro (Marja Helander's pastoral photography, where a power station tower looms high above a figure in the landscape, or Jonathan Jones' beautiful but unfulfilling neon light sculpture in the shape of the Métis infinity symbol) ultimately fails to do so. This "miss" is compounded by the reality that these works are not installed in the Hydro building, but instead in the pristine new Plug In ICA gallery, removing the conversation just far enough, thereby elevating the artists' gestures to the aesthetic rather than the political. So might there be censorship underneath the pleasantries?

Speaking of lip service... Of course the WAG is stuck somewhere between being a co-organizer and a parallel presentation partner venue. Never one to have the foresight to come up with a good idea on their own, or to be quick to respond to one handed to them on a silver platter, the WAG's contribution to *Close Encounters*, predictably, is an assortment of Inuit prints and drawings they have held in their vaults and shown off-and-on for decades, coupled with a sporadic (but impressive looking) film series toward the end of the project's four-month stint. This goes hand-in-hand with the shameful reality that the WAG was never able to fulfill its promise to bring a full-time curator of Aboriginal art on staff. A decade since Rielisms (2000, curator: Cathy Mattes) the institution is still dragging its feet on committing to the present (let alone future) of contemporary Aboriginal art. [5] It was recently announced that the WAG will be going ahead with its (long overdue) Inuit Art Centre. [6] Housing the largest collection of Inuit art in the world, it would seem obvious for the WAG to invest in such a research and presentation space as the Centre will provide, however it is appalling that they can barely facilitate presenting recent work by (living) Inuit artists during *Close Encounters*. Another disappointment is the reality that Winnipeg, an artist-run town by many accounts (with approximately 20 professional presentation venues) was unable to provide more support in terms of venues for display, partnership, or dialogue. There are a handful of great spaces that were either not approached or not used for *Close Encounters* (aceartinc.; Fleet Galleries; Gallery One One One at the University of Manitoba; Martha Street Studio; Semai Gallery; Video Pool Media Arts Centre; the Winnipeg Film Group's Cinematheque or their newly minted Black Lodge).

Yes, this year the stars have aligned themselves in Winnipeg... but will this example of the right people at the right time with the right amount of money compare to past achievements such as The National Gallery's Land, Spirit, Power (1992; curators: Diana Nemiroff, Robert Houle and Charlotte Townsend-Gault) or The Canadian Museum of Civilization's Indigena: Contemporary Native Perspectives (1992; curators: Gerald McMaster and Lee-Ann Martin) or will it go down in history closer to the Glenbow Museum fiasco The Spirit Sings: Artistic Traditions of Canada's First People (1988; curators: Julia D. Harrison, et al), presented in conjunction with the Winter Olympic Games? [7] I suppose I can add the recent Vancouver 2010 debacle to this list, along with the Cultural Olympiad's interest in all things Aboriginal... except, of course, for land rights. Will *Close Encounters* carry with it historical prescience? Will it act as a stepping-stone for more in-depth analysis of the future of Aboriginal art practice internationally?

There is, believe it or not, some talk about *Close Encounters* acting as the debut of a biennial. Agh. Sigh. I think I've got a case of the biennial blues. We don't need another biennial, do we? If this train is already too fast to stop (which it likely is), can we at least see this as a roaming two-year project that will be taken across our country, into the States and beyond, not just presented in Winnipeg as something inevitably co-opted by the board of tourism?



Revolutionary Sundays (Installation View), 2011. Photo by: Michael Maranda. Courtesy: AGYU and La Central, Bogota.

J.J. KEGAN MCFADDEN is a Winnipeg-based cultural worker.

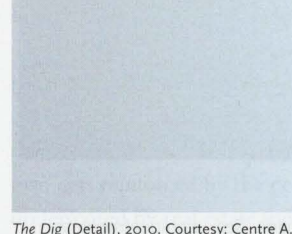
Notes:

- [1] It should be noted that Urban Shaman is presenting two exhibitions as part of *Close Encounters: The Next 500 Years*. Keesic Douglas' solo show, *Trade Me* [28 January - 19 March 2011] opened one week after the initial festivities for *Close Encounters*, followed by the group exhibition *Frontrunners* [28 May - July 17, 2011]. *Frontrunners* traces the contemporary Aboriginal art movement in Manitoba leading to the inception of Urban Shaman in 1996. Artwork featured will include work from the 1970s that reflects the artists' roles as social change agents for that time, including work by Norval Morrisseau, Daphne Odjig, Alex Janvier, Jackson Beardy, Carl Ray, Joseph Sanchez and Eddy Cobiess.
- [2] globalwinnipeg.com "Manitoba named murder capital third year in a row", Wednesday, 27 October 2010: "In numbers released by Statistics Canada [...], Manitoba had the highest homicide rate of any province in 2009, topping the list for the third year in a row. Winnipeg also had the highest homicide rate among Canada's ten largest cities with 32 killings last year, for a rate of 4.15 homicides for every 100,000 people."

- [3] Winnipeg also holds the dubious title of Child-Poverty Capital of Canada. See: winnipegfreepress.com, "Child poverty capital: 68% of aboriginal kids poor, report card states," 26 November 2010: "Almost three-quarters of aboriginal children aged six and under live in poverty in Manitoba. The depressing figure affecting 68 per cent of aboriginal children six and under is one of the reasons Manitoba is ranked the child-poverty capital of Canada for the second year in a row."
- [4] At present, downtown Winnipeg is a cluster of bargain shops, empty storefronts, skywalks, and parking garages. Even The Bay store, once the symbol of prosperity in an otherwise bleak concrete reality, has been forced to make room in its basement space for Zellers. There are few florists, laundromats, and at most three places to buy groceries for the 13,000 Winnipeggers who live downtown, or for the 72,000 (10% of the city's population) who work there.
- [5] Now might be a good time to refresh our memory of the fact that two artist-run centres, aceartinc. and Urban Shaman, were the first in the city to present Rebecca Belmore in a post-Venice engagement in 2006. Belmore did show as part of *In the Blink of an Eye* a year later (Winnipeg Art Gallery, 2007; curators: Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan); this was a commissioned experimental film and video program featuring new work by twelve contemporary Canadian artists.
- [6] Winnipegfreepress.com: "WAG planning \$30M Inuit Art Centre..." 4 September 2010. In the article, WAG Director, Stephen Borys, is quoted: "During the centennial season, extending from fall 2012 to summer 2013, "There will be Canadian art, European art and American art featured, but rising above them all, there's going to be a truly celebratory approach to the Inuit collection. It must be given its due."
- [7] And why is it that there is only interest in contemporary Aboriginal art practice when other countries/outsideers are watching, or when there is a large festival or some kind (Olympics/Cultural Capital Projects/etc)? Are we not reinforcing a post-contact ghettoizing of Aboriginal ideas with these schemes? What would it look like if *Close Encounters* were 80% Indigenous and 20% non-Indigenous?

The Museum Formerly Known as Centre A:

Jesse McKee in conversation with Hank Bull, Makiko Hara, Debra Zhou and Jinhan Koh



The Dig (Detail), 2010. Courtesy: Centre A.

For the past 10 years, Centre A — Vancouver International Centre for Contemporary Asian Art — has been a vigorous anomaly in the contemporary art scene in Vancouver. The institution straddles the roles of artist-run centre and public gallery, as it focuses on connecting artistic practices from across the pacific region. Originally intended to be a collecting institution, the centre has instead become a constantly adapting space dedicated to artistic production, exhibition and the discursive activity surrounding contemporary art from Asia and work by Asian artists from elsewhere.

September 2010 marked Centre A's first decade of activity and it was commemorated with the exhibition *The Dig*. This show addressed, for the first time, the institution's collection of works, which accumulated and remained in the Centre's storage room over the years. The anniversary was also marked by a major conference, "Let's Twist Again," which sought to address the centre's position in Vancouver, Canada, and the rest of the world. This conference was marked by a keynote address from Sydney Biennale curator David Elliot, and saw papers and presentations from a plethora of stakeholders in the institution's past, present and future.

What follows is a round-table discussion held six months after the exhibition and conference. Taking stock of the outcomes and internal recommendations that have resulted from recent activities, Centre A imagines its next decade.



The Dig (Detail), 2010. Courtesy: Centre A.

Jesse McKee: Let's start by talking about the exhibition *The Dig*, which served as an inadvertent archive of Centre A's 10 years of activity as a producing and presenting institution. How did all these works end up sticking around? How was the installation conceived? And where did the works go after the exhibition?

Hank Bull: The first question is about the collection. The organization is empowered in its constitution to be a collecting institution. At the beginning, Centre A was imagined as a museum and a museum would have an international collection. That didn't happen for two main reasons. One, there was a lot of opposition to the idea of a museum. Especially a museum only focused on contemporary Asian art. There was a fear that

this might be a neo-colonialist hangover, at worst a neo-orientalist fetish.

The other reason is that to be a collecting institution, and to be recognized as such, requires an enormous capital investment for climate control and conservation, which is set in stone by the federal government. Instead we became a place for dialogue and projects. But, nevertheless, we ended up with things. People leave stuff.

Makiko Hara: For instance, in *The Dig* exhibition, the work by Hong Hao was the first to be gifted to the organization with the idea that it would go toward building a collection. But, because the concept of the organization changed, we never had a chance to show that work as we became more like a

contemporary art centre. On several occasions we got gifts from artists or objects were left over from installations. We also made editions and things accumulated over the years. After all this time, we wanted to return to the question of how we function differently from a contemporary museum. The show was a way to deal with this.

HB: That's a question that is faced by virtually every artist-run centre. You're anti-museum. You're not supposed to be like that. But at the end of the day... 5, 10, 15 years later, every single centre has a back room full of extremely valuable cultural artifacts: ephemera, video recordings, letters, correspondence, even paintings and sculptures. As an organization you have a responsibility to take care of these things. There's no accreditation or legitimacy to the collection and yet it is still a collection. What is the implication of this in museological terms? What does that mean for the evolution or reinvention of museums of the future? Those are some of the questions we wanted to pose with the show.

Jinhan Koh: It's reflective of Centre A's exhibition space, which in some ways works like a project space. Often, you exhibit work that has had a previous exhibition history. But also a lot of work is commissioned, and at times isn't finished, or is still in process when it's shown to the public. In a way, it's inevitable that this becomes reflective of how we frame the work that is being exhibited, as well as Centre A as an institution.

HB: There is an Italian collector who used to go to Fluxus performances, where say, Geoffrey Hendricks would cut his own beard off. The collector would run up on stage and pick up all the hair, put it in a ziplock bag and label it. He would fill his house in rural Italy with this stuff. Now he's got this incredible collection of broken furniture, scraps of paper... whatever was left after the performances. We've done a lot of that too. Sometimes it's fragments of installations, bits and pieces of things, but it was all important. For instance, we kept that work by you

was the online component where everyone was skyping in from around the world. This comes on top of the fact that Centre A has 250 unique visits to its website a day, which is far more than the 20 people who come into the gallery every day. It's a really strong signal to build that and go Web 2.0 and develop an interface between your real space and online space.

Debra Zhou: When I visited Asia Art Archive in Hong Kong, they said they get 350 visits a day to their website. Which is not much more than us. They are better known internationally and have a longer history, but we almost have the same web traffic. This is interesting because they have a solid and comprehensive archive of material about artists and artworks produced in Asia. Our collection and archive at Centre A fills part of the gap that AAA has. We are a map of things happening outside Asia since 2000. It's a record of Asian artists showing in Vancouver and also asks what is Asia? And what does Asia mean in Vancouver? Going back to talking about the internet, I'm happy to say we've been approved for new funding to build a web 2.0 interactive and experimental website. This is going to be a state-of-the-art website, where everyone has a user interface and can upload their own materials, and interact with the online content that the artists and institution provide. That might start as early as next January. We'll be able to generate much more response.

HB: The website in a way is a parallel for the space itself. I like to think of Centre A as a space in which everybody has a role to play. You might be a journalist, someone walking off the street, an artist, a student, a collector. But everyone has a way in somehow. And the space is a place for all to meet. To have a place online that amplifies that is the goal.

JM: I was recently speaking with the artists Oliver Laric and Aleksandra Domanovic, they contribute to this website vwork.com. They told me that their primary interaction with art is now through the internet. So

this had me thinking about the next decade when we'll have a whole generation of art students and young artists who will have a primary knowledge of contemporary art from around the world through this medium. How does this affect the practices, knowledge and the tastes of art students and young emerging artists?

DZ: More than just disseminating information and letting people discover it, the important thing is that we can bring people together. Centre A is essentially a place for people to meet and come to see art. Ideally, the website is not just a broadcast site, it's a place for exchanging ideas and bringing people together.

HB: This is something that Makiko outlined in her artistic program here. This is a gallery, but it is more than a showcase. It's more than a place to go as a spectator, an appreciator or consumer. We're also a production studio or a residency, or a platform for a conference. There are all these different ways that you can interact with the space. The art object in a way becomes a trigger for interaction.

JK: One concern that never came up and something I'd like to address is that this meeting place shouldn't become a diasporic one. That would do us a disservice. The problem with this kind of institution is that it needs to go beyond that. It's filled with good intentions, but it's a bit hippy-dippy. The problem, when you mention Asian, is that it locates the concerns of the institution too far away from this place, Vancouver, Canada, and its relationship to the diaspora that gives reason for Centre A to exist. Of course, what we territorially and culturally define as Asia is the starting point for this dialogue, but we need to set this in the context of the whole of Canadian culture. I don't want to be too utopian or wishy-washy about it, but it is a danger. By calling it a meeting place it's too feel-good. It is left too open, albeit with good intent, but without direction, focus, an articulated directive, and a voice that is specific to Centre A.

HB: Maybe a boxing ring?

JK: Yeah, it is more like a boxing ring. What will survive? I don't want to be too Darwinian about it, but that is closer to the cultural process. But it is fraught with lots of challenges.

DZ: Meeting place has a reference to Centre A's unique structure. We're not a museum. For instance, if you go to the Vancouver Art Gallery, you don't go there to meet the people who work there or meet the artists. In a way it has a reference to the fact that we want to make friends, it's a very simple idea at first.

Biographies


HANK BULL is the founder and outgoing director of Centre A. As an artist, curator and director, he has been a major contributor to the contemporary art scene in Vancouver for nearly 40 years.

MAKIKO HARA has been Centre A's curator since 2007. Originally from Tokyo, she has worked as a curator on major international projects such as the Yokohama Triennial in Japan, and Scotia Bank's Nuit Blanche in Toronto.

DEBRA ZHOU has been Centre A's curator-in-residence since 2009. Originally from Shanghai, she has worked on projects at the Shanghai Duolun Museum of Modern Art and Yishu Journal. She recently curated Hau Jin's exhibition *My Big Family* at 221a Artist Run Centre in Vancouver.

JINHAN KOH is an artist whose work was exhibited in Centre A's 10 year retrospective exhibition *The Dig* in 2010. He is an active member of Instant Coffee, a collective now primarily based in Vancouver.

JESSE MCKEE is the exhibitions curator at the Western Front in Vancouver and previously worked as a public programs curator at the Barbican Art Gallery, London.



critical art + culture

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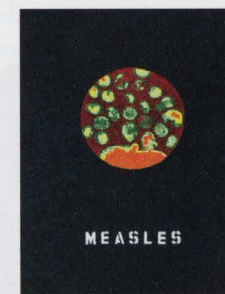
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Ruth Cuthand:
BACK TALK
(works 1983-2009)



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political invective, humour, and the strategic use of anger and anti-aesthetic.

Co-produced by the Mendel Art Gallery and TRIBE Inc., Saskatoon. Curated by Jen Budney, Mendel Art Gallery.

Karine Giboulo and Olia Mishchenko:
HABITAPTATION

Come explore two imaginary miniature cities! Giboulo's work critiques consumerism: she depicts slum dwellers alongside glittering skyscrapers. Mishchenko's elaborate drawings propose intuitive experiments. Curated by Sandra Fraser, Mendel Art Gallery.

Image: Ruth Cuthand, *Measles*, 2009, beads and paint on suedeboard.

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DANCING MOUNTIES, FLAMINGO PINK JACKETS, CULTURE AND ELITISM

LEFT WING
★
PINKO

by Kirsty Robertson

BIKE RIDING
★
PINKO



<top> Left Wing Pinko, 2011.
<bottom left> Bike Riding Pinko, 2011.
Both Courtesy of Spacing.ca

At the closing ceremonies for the 2010 Olympic Games in Vancouver, as crooner Michael Buble belted out the lyrics to the 1867 nation-building anthem “The Maple Leaf Forever,” centre stage at BC Place Stadium was overtaken by a spectacle of dancing helium-filled balloon statues, including gigantic prancing moose and beavers, gold-medal-toting 20-foot-tall hockey players and plaid-shirted lumberjacks. As these massive balloons floated up to the stadium ceiling, groups of dancing backup singers dressed in scanty costumes that riffed on the well-known red-serge uniforms of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police can-canned across the stage. All of this dancing was set against a spectacular painted backdrop of mountains and pristine lakes and gigantic saluting Mountie statues. As the balloons drifted out of the stadium, they were replaced by a series of performances by some of Canada’s best (read, most lucrative) bands. The spectacle took stereotypes of Canadiana and blew them up (literally), in what was, according to the CBC coverage, “a tongue-in-cheek nod to everything Canadians are deeply proud to be.” [1]

Not long afterwards, and half-way across the country, a spectacle of a different, but connected, sort unfolded. On December 7, 2010, hockey commentator Don Cherry, “swathed in garish fluorescent pink, like an aggressive overgrown flamingo,” [2] was invited to “introduce” incoming Toronto mayor Rob Ford. In a speech notable primarily for its rambling incoherence, Cherry infamously denounced “left-wing pinko newspapers out there” who were “ripping him to shreds,” and “pinkos out there that ride bicycles and everything,” before concluding that Rob Ford was “going to be the greatest mayor this city has ever seen, as far as I’m concerned, and put that in your pipe, you left-wing kooks.” [3] Cherry’s comments belligerently echoed what has to now been a fairly quiet (though oft noted) shift to the right in Canadian politics and media. In a speech given a week prior to the ceremony, a less irate Cherry opined, “People are sick of the elites and artsy people running the show. It’s time for some lunch pail, blue-collar people.” [4] Despite the obvious critique that Ford is a wealthy career politician and hardly a blue-collar lunch-packing everyman, Cherry’s comments speak to a clear antagonism towards the “elite” arts that have characterized the last few years. The years since the global financial crisis have been kind neither to the arts nor to criticism, and with Don Cherry “telling it like it is” (even when it obviously isn’t), and the Olympic ceremony showcasing a bunch of tired stereotypes and CRIA

[5] stooges as Canadian “culture,” it seems high time to assess and respond. [6]

How has the relationship between the arts, creative industries, economics and ideology in Canada changed in the short period between 2008 and the end of 2010? [7] There are two main points that I want to explore: first, to unfold this notion of “elitism” as it applies to art, creative industries, education and the place that we (writers and readers of this article) occupy in a changing system; second, to question how the positioning of culture as elite has affected the space for, and imagining of, critical response.

Cherry infamously denounced “left-wing pinko newspapers out there” who were “ripping him to shreds,” and “pinkos out there that ride bicycles and everything,” before concluding that Rob Ford was “going to be the greatest mayor this city has ever seen, as far as I’m concerned, and put that in your pipe, you left-wing kooks.”

The precedent and context for Cherry’s comments was Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s October 2008 pre-election dismissal of artists as people who attend “rich galas” and live off “subsidies” provided by “ordinary working people.” [8] This remark, which came in the wake of nearly \$45 million in cuts to the arts (especially the removal of “economically inefficient” programs such as Promart, Trade Routes, the Canadian Memory Fund, Canadian Culture Online, Audio-Visual Preservation Trust, Canadian Independent Film and Video Fund, and the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network) inspired reams of analysis and criticism. [9] When the Conservatives were not able to secure a majority in the 2008 election, many observers surmised that their stance on culture had lost them a significant number of votes, particularly in Québec. [10] In the two years following the original statement, Harper made several attempts to, if not repair the damage, at least brand himself as less than a philistine, hammering out a Beatles tune on the piano (accompanied by cellist Yo-Yo Ma) at the National Arts Centre in October 2009; and singing rock songs to fellow Conservatives at the annual caucus Christmas party on Parliament Hill in December 2010. Both performances had much to do with making Harper seem looser, less threatening and less distant. But both performances also imagined culture as something to be consumed and reproduced rather than created and made. Had Harper shown a secret penchant for abstract

painting rather than an ability to play piano, the result would have been completely out of line with the Conservative's ideological platform on culture — to produce is elitist, to consume is populist.

In a recent issue of the *New York Times*, David Brooks, in trying to understand the Tea Party phenomenon in the United States, wrote: "The public is not only shifting from left to right. Every single idea associated with the educated class has grown more unpopular over the past year. The educated class believes in global warming, so public skepticism about global warming is on the rise. The educated class supports abortion rights, so public opinion is shifting against them. The educated class supports gun control, so opposition to gun control is mounting. The story is the same in foreign affairs. The educated class is internationalist, so isolationist sentiment is now at an all-time high...." [11] While there is, as yet, no Tea Party movement in Canada, [12] Brooks' argument obviously resonates with Cherry's speech, the Olympic ceremony and current political stances on culture. One might add that the shift to the right has not brought a return of a connoisseurship model of high art appreciation that has, in the past, been associated with conservatism. [13] Rather, in line with David Brooks's observations, populist politicians have moved to criticize and defund the cultural projects and the arts supported by the supposed elite. I suggest that in addition to such repositioning, there is more at stake.

Though the language was slightly different, an argument against "cultural elitism" played an immensely important role in left-leaning cultural critique in Canada through the 1980s and 1990s. Anti-racist initiatives, as well as work done, for example, to encourage more equitable funding practices and more equitable representation in museums and galleries, often relied heavily on criticism of an elite

No longer oppositional, the "culturepreneurial" artist could be imaged as a model neoliberal citizen in a social situation where the lines between work and leisure were erased, and work was seen as the site for self-expression, creativity and freedom.

that was keeping the doors of those museums and funding bodies closed. While there was plenty of evidence that an "elite culture" existed (and could be made fun of), that elitism was associated with the cultural project that had come out of the Massey Commission. Elite culture was, in other words, repeatedly associated with national sovereignty. In something of a circular argument, left-leaning and centrist arts activists both critiqued and also supported "Canadian" culture. Within such arguments, an elite culture that functioned as ballast against American popular culture could be decoupled from the elitist culture that was the focus of critique. For example, battles

to secure more equitable funding for women or artists of colour from the Canada Council were not seen as opposed to government attempts to secure protection for culture on international stages (such as UNESCO or the negotiations leading up to the signing of the NAFTA). What changed was the economization and instrumentalization of culture through neoliberal globalization.

As Imre Szeman notes, "art was once defined by its opposition to the market." Neoliberalism, in applying a market logic to social and political sectors, reversed the above logic, so that art could be defined through its relation to the market. No longer oppositional, the "culturepreneurial" artist, in fact, could be imaged as a model neoliberal citizen in a social situation where, as Szeman notes, the lines between work and leisure were erased, and work was seen as the site for self-expression, creativity and freedom. [14] Neoliberalism appeared to undermine any critical potential of art, while leaving open only one avenue of agency: economic potential.

In the wake of Harper's ill-advised comments in October 2008, arts supporters across the country rallied against the cuts to the arts. Many did so, however, taking up the neoliberal mantra that the arts make important economic contributions to the Canadian GDP. Vancouver arts activist Adrienne Wong, in a comment fairly typical of this vein of thought, said "the government [is] actually hearing the outrage and recognizing that this community is a strong community, that we contribute to the economy, that we have an argument to be made and a voice that will be heard." [15] There was a strategic shift from earlier models in which the economic potential of art seemed at best a distant concern for those lobbying to secure visibility, understanding and funding for the arts. [16] By 2008, rhetoric had changed significantly and economic defenses

became the primary methodology of much activism in the face of cuts from the Conservative minority government, particularly as that funding was then redirected to the spectacle of the Olympics and the associated cross-country torch relay. The danger here is that my argument will be read as a cultural nationalist one — that because

there was a shift, what came before was better. This is not my intention at all, for neither model (cultural nationalism or neoliberalism) has much to offer cultural producers.

At the time, even as many arts activists were "economizing culture" to activist ends, some in government, the media, think tanks, academia and elsewhere began to decouple the idea of a national culture from the "creative industries." In media coverage, the nomenclature generally employed refers to "arts and creative industries," while "national" culture is less about status quo funding and



Christopher Drost, *Rob Ford and Don Cherry*, 2010. Courtesy: Christopher Drost.

BUT THERE IS A NEED FOR SOMETHING MORE. THE RESPONSE TO DON CHERRY, FOR EXAMPLE, UNFORTUNATELY SEEMED TO FOCUS PRIMARILY ON HIS CHOICE OF JACKET. IT IS TIME TO REACT. IT IS TIME TO CREATE.

the circulation of the arts and more about the spectacle of nationality; the Olympic closing ceremonies, for example, where national culture became a parodic spectacle of itself. This division in thinking is deeply connected to how the creative industries are practically applied, if not imagined, in Canada. In the 1998 Creative Industries report that launched the creative industries in the UK, the sector included 14 categories ranging from architecture to performing arts and antique markets. The authors of the report envisaged that economic growth would come through "exploitation" of knowledge, information and intellectual property emerging from such pursuits. In turn, the buzz created around culture would filter into other sectors — tourism, finance, etc.

In Canada, the term creative industries is often used to refer to the arts, but it is often subservient to the "knowledge economy," which is much more closely associated with Richard Florida's definition

of a Creative Class that includes not just the arts (which are used as an entrepreneurial model), but also science, engineering, education, computer programming, research, health care, business and finance, the legal sector, and education. [17] In other words, a creative industry is more likely to be one associated with the tar sands than it is to be associated with the arts sector, since the development of the oil fields depends on technological innovation to be profitable. For the most part, when the federal government speaks about developing a knowledge economy, about creativity or innovation, the arts are at best a decorative but unnecessary component. In the 2009 Action Plan, for example, arts and culture were described as useful only insofar as they could, "navigate the changing technological and economic landscapes." [18] In turn, although funding for the arts in some sectors has in fact increased under the Conservative government, in other sectors it has been dramatically cut (see, for example the cuts to Canadian Heritage that have seen *Fuse Magazine* itself put

under pressure and forced into a more entrepreneurial model to stay afloat). Cultural priorities have been ideologically reaffirmed via different strategies for funding and circulating Canadian art.

I will conclude by suggesting some critical avenues that are left for emerging from this situation. But first, I will briefly outline how the ongoing dismissal of the arts as “elite,” and the economization of culture that underpins the creative industries have very real results. I play this out through just one example, though there are many: the granting of “national” museum status to the (largely) privately funded Human Rights Museum in Winnipeg. The Human Rights Museum, established in Winnipeg by the late media mogul Izzy Asper, became the first major national museum outside of the capital region. [19] The federal government refused funds to the city of

For the most part, when the federal government speaks about developing a knowledge economy, about creativity or innovation, the arts are at best a decorative but unnecessary component.

Toronto, which had, with (former) federal, provincial and municipal support, participated enthusiastically in a kind of starchitectural renovation project thought to encourage the creation of Creative Cities and the seduction of tourists, yet monies were granted to a museum outside of the traditional cultural core and for a project that had been initiated from a private source. [20] The case is a complicated one that cannot be covered in detail here, but much of the criticism of the museum has centered on Asper’s pro-Israel stance, and the way that such a “private” political vision might translate into the organization of what is supposedly a “public” museum (particularly one concerned with human rights). [21] What is also interesting is the way that media coverage of the museum (the completion of which has been delayed through three successive governments) was originally linked to Liberal aspirations for a larger international presence via a vibrant cultural landscape (leading to a promised \$100 million from the Paul Martin Liberals) and eventually translated into an ideal public-private partnership under the Harper Conservatives.

Over time, the Human Rights Museum has become less an anomaly and more a model, and as such, it suggests a turn towards private partnerships that rely less on the economic potential of the arts to contribute to the GDP, and more on the unfettering of culture from state sponsorship and its movement into a market system. The move to open a “national” museum outside of Ottawa can be read, again, as “anti-elitist,” as an attempt to spread culture across the land rather than holding it tightly in the hands of a few power brokers in the capital city. The museum board has also been careful to distance itself as much as possible from the controversial statements of Izzy

Asper, repeatedly stating that the board is independent. Interesting too is the way that the Human Rights Museum has relied extensively on public surveys in order to legitimize its mandate. On the surface, both the decentralized location of the museum and the reliance on public input seem to address some of the institutional “elitism” against which critics were reacting in the 1990s. [22] A closer look, however, suggests that in fact the Human Rights Museum will simply replicate what Paul Saurette calls “epistemological populism,” “a theory of knowledge that assumes that the most reliable and trustworthy type of knowledge is the direct individual experience of ‘common’ people — the lessons of which can be unproblematically universalized.” [23] Would the Art Gallery of Ontario have been open to Richard Hill’s “Meeting Ground” exhibition, which challenged the Eurocentrism of the collection from an aboriginal

perspective, had the gallery been curated according to popular or public opinion? Call me an elitist, but the most important lessons that I’ve learned have always come when I’ve had to undo or unlearn something that I took as given.

Nevertheless, epistemological populism is an extremely effective strategy as it closes off

avenues of response. If critical response is seen as too difficult, too wordy, too “educated,” then what is the alternative? Arguing on the grounds that a nation needs a culture? We’ve been there and done that and it was rife with problems the first time around. If the Conservative vision of culture is one of consumption, in fact, epistemological populism is incredibly productive, biopolitically reproducing itself in each response to something that is too difficult or boring to confront.

Against the backdrop of the global economic crisis and the demise of Lehman Brothers (and auctioning off of its art collection), culture has fallen far from the vaunted position it occupied in the 1998 Creative Industries report released in the UK. It seemed obvious, even at the time, that culture and the creative industries (no matter how they were defined) could not shoulder the kind of economic responsibility that came with trying to turn around post-manufacturing economies and merging multiethnic and unequally represented peoples into smoothly functioning docile and productive communities. Even then, the critiques of the neoliberalization of culture were largely aimed at unraveling the misrepresentation (actually, artists are not elites, and culture-preneurialism with its incessant working hours and low pay is not necessarily a model that should be emulated), rather than worrying about what would come next. What happens to a creative city model, for example, if the creative city is shown to be economically inexpedient (Richard Florida’s increasingly far-fetched responses to the global economic crisis and the role for the creative industries therein is a clear case in point)? [24]

Should we be worried about this? I think so, because I see it reflected everywhere, translated into a sort of self-loathing, a turn away from critical politics, and an outright distrust of the kind of sustained critical thought that led in many ways to the opening up of the cultural scene in the 1990s and 2000s. Further, it is present not only in the cranky and curmudgeonly “everyday” Don Cherry supporters, but also in cultural workers, students, arts administrators and others who are the targets of those flippant dismissals. In part, this may come from the difficulty of trying to level an argument which can be met with such casual retorts — it is difficult to explain the vagaries of a political-economic system when the rejoinder can be boiled down to the single word “elitist.” Perhaps also those labeled elitist are often those mired in student debt, or with low income, with little political agency and little opportunity at all in a system that resents them and that positions economic reversal of the recession as increasingly the only goal at local, national and global levels. Having to constantly justify culture is hard work, and the politically expedient response seems to be to do it on an economic level. But there is a need for something more — the response to Don Cherry, for example, unfortunately seemed to focus primarily on his choice of jacket. It is time to react. It is time to create.

KIRSTY ROBERTSON is an elitist, bike-riding, bus-taking, pinko, left-wing kook who doesn’t smoke pipes. She does bring her lunch to work, sometimes in a pail. She is working on her book *Tear Gas Epiphanies: New Economies of Protest, Vision and Culture in Canada* and is hoping that Toronto Roller Derby (TORD) will be successful in opposing Rob Ford and keeping the Downsview bus running to their practice space.

Notes

- [1] Point of View, “Olympic Closing Ceremonies: What did you Think of Them?” (1 March 2010): <http://www.cbc.ca/news/pointofview/2010/03/olympic-closing-ceremonies-what-did-you-think-of-them.html>.
- [2] Andrew Cohen, “Politics as Cheap Entertainment,” *The Ottawa Citizen* (14 December, 2010), p. A16.
- [3] The full text of Cherry’s speech can be found here: http://torontoist.com/2010/12/don_cherrys_speech_to_council_transcribed.php.
- [4] The quote comes from a Dec 2010 speech, reported in David Rider, “Why Don Cherry Backs Rob Ford,” *Toronto Star* (3 December 2010): <http://www.thestar.com/news/torontocouncil/article/901562--why-don-cherry-backs-rob-ford?bn=1>.
- [5] Canadian Recording Industry Association, whose work to secure IP protection for their property/artists forms an undercurrent to ways of culture has and will be understood in the twenty-first century.
- [6] The power of an anti-elitist argument became apparent to me as I tried to write this sentence — everything I wrote sounded like it had been channeled through the very language that was being dismissed as elite. Assess and respond? Why not just form a Royal Commission?
- [7] These dates are chosen because this article can be seen as a follow up to “Crude Culture: Canada and the Creative Industries,” which I wrote for Fuse in 2008, prior to the global financial meltdown.

[8] The full quote is: “I think when ordinary working people come home, turn on the TV and see a gala of a bunch of people at a rich gala all subsidized by the taxpayers, claiming their subsidies have actually gone up, I don’t think that’s something that resonates with ordinary people.”

[9] The Liberal Party has tried, relatively unsuccessfully, to document the ideological impetus behind Tory spending cuts, while also pointing out the paradox between the image of “competent economic management” circulated by the Conservative government, and actual deficit spending and increasingly low rates of productivity. See Dan Veniez, “Tory Times are Tough Times,” *The Mark* (14 September, 2010): <http://www.themarknews.com/articles/2366-tory-times-are-tough-times?page=2>. See also Marc Léger, “The Non-Productive Role of the Artist: The Creative Industries in Canada,” *Third Text* 24 (2010), pp. 557-70.

[10] Peter Birnie, “Harper’s Slighting of the Arts Comes Back to Bite Him,” *Vancouver Sun* (15 October, 2008), p. A13.

[11] David Brooks, “Tea Party Teens,” *The New York Times* (4 January 2010): <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/05/opinion/05brooks.html>.

[12] Though there is a Tea Party Movement of Canada Facebook group with approximately 1,700 members.

[13] For example, see the writing of critic Hilton Kramer. The idea that there is (or was) some relationship between conservatism, class and taste has formed the basis of a number of extremely important critical projects (see for example, the work that has come out of Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of habitus).

[14] Imre Szeman, “Out With the New,” in Lynda Jessup, Erin Morton and Kirsty Robertson, eds. *Negotiations in a Vacant Lot: Studying the Visual in Canada* (forthcoming).

[15] Ibid.

[16] As mentioned in “Crude Culture” (2008), an obvious example of this was the 2007 Visual Arts Summit in Ottawa — a huge undertaking to bring those working in the arts together across a broad range of interests. However, at the weekend meetings where a huge variety of strategies for securing visibility came up, economic importance or the idea of the creative industries were almost completely absent.

[17] See Invest Toronto, “Creative Industries Sector,” <http://www.investtoronto.ca/Business-Toronto/Key-Business-Sectors/Creative-Industries.aspx>.

[18] <http://www.actionplan.gc.ca/eng/feature.asp?featureId=4>

[19] There are others, including the National Railway Museum in Montreal and Pier 21 in Halifax, but neither of these are on the scale of the Human Rights Museum.

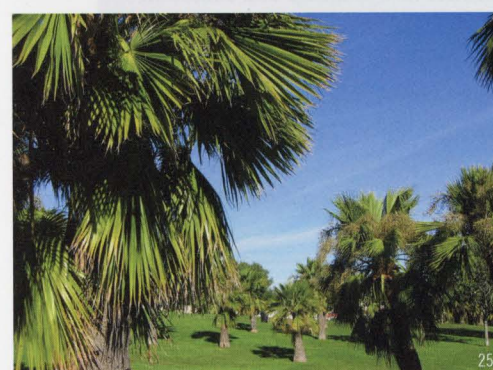
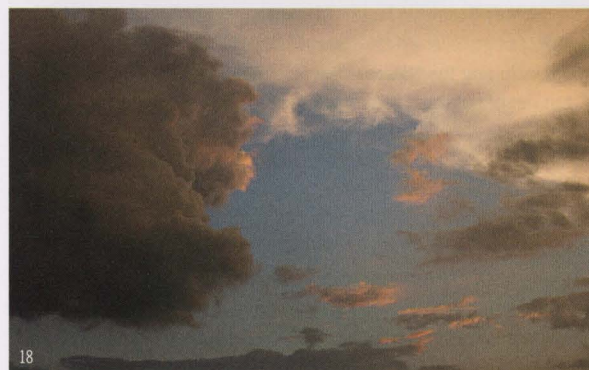
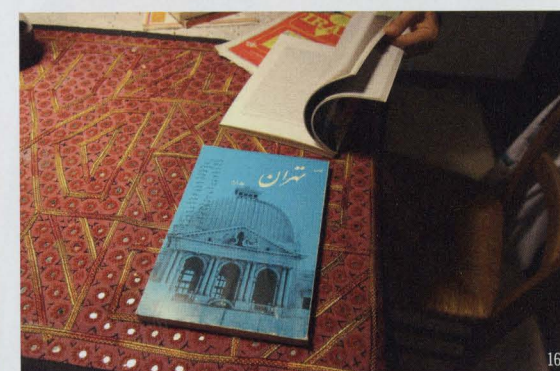
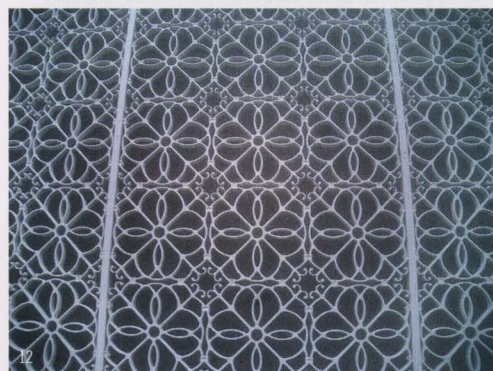
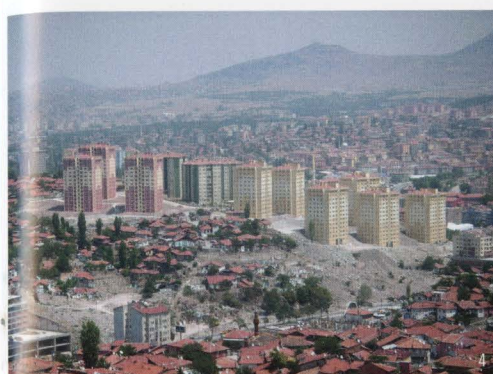
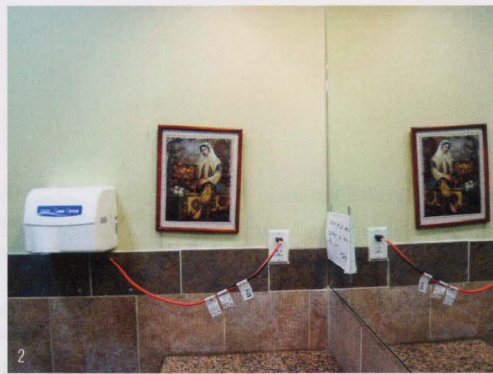
[20] While there is an extensive recent history of museums and galleries having to find matching funds from private sources, this is categorically different from projects that begin with private funding. See Barbara Jenkins, “Toronto’s Cultural Renaissance,” *Canadian Journal of Communication* 30 (2005), pp. 169-86.

[21] Mark For just one example see Lubomyr Luciuk, “A Human Rights Museum for All,” *The Mark* (19 January 2011): <http://www.themarknews.com/articles/3790-a-human-rights-museum-for-all>. Luciuk has been a long-time critic of the Human Rights Museum, and previously of the Canadian War Museum.

[22] Unless one happens to be a cultural nationalist such as Liberal supporter, Historica director, historian and pundit Andrew Cohen who has argued repeatedly that cultural institutions should be grouped together in Ottawa, and that citizens should come to their capital city as part of a nation building exercise.

[23] Paul Saurette, “When Smart Parties Mark Stupid Decisions,” *The Mark* (23 July 2010): <http://www.themarknews.com/articles/1907-when-smart-parties-make-stupid-decisions>.

[24] Take, for example, Florida’s work during the Olympics, which argued that Creative Cities produced medal-winning athletes.



Never Been to Tehran was a worldwide exhibition of photography reflecting what 29 international artists imagined Iran's capital city to look like. What you see here is a partial selection of over 300 photographs which were taken in each contributors home town, uploaded to an online photosharing site, and projected as a slideshow simultaneously in galleries and public spaces around the world (including the Parkingallery in Tehran, Iran). Participating artists were from Canada, New Zealand, the United States, Europe, Japan, and the Middle East.

In a time when news conglomerates regularly paint a reductive portrait of Iran, *Never Been to Tehran* looked at both the limits and the possibilities of the Internet to bridge a space between cultures. For the international contributors to this exhibition, the task was to search through their daily lives for clues to a foreign place, for the possibility that somewhere else exists right under their noses and that, like some clunky form of astral projection one can travel to other lands without leaving home. For viewers in Tehran, the project presented a chance to witness a travelogue-like mirroring of their globally projected image, taken from the daily lives and environs of outsiders. —co-organizers Andrea Grover & Jon Rubin www.NeverBeenToTehran.com

Participants

Dean Baldwin > Orangeville, Ontario, Canada⁶
Aideen Barry > County Galway, Ireland¹
Cedric Bomford > Canada³
Otto von Busch > Malmö, Sweden & Istanbul, Turkey⁴
James Charlton > Auckland, New Zealand⁹
Sara Graham, Canada⁷
Andrea Grover > Houston, USA²
Deniz Gul > Istanbul, Turkey¹¹
Levin Haegle > London, England¹⁰
Greg Halpern & Ahndraya Parlato > Ithaca, USA¹⁸
Carli Hoffmann & Jakob Seibel > Frankfurt, Germany
Rumana Husain > Karachi, Pakistan²⁴
Jun'ichiro Ishii > Paris, France²⁰
Martin Krusche > Gleisdorf, Austria¹⁵

Rosie Lynch > Berlin, Germany
Francesco Nonino > Bologna, Italy¹⁶
Elena Perino > Saluzzo, Italy^{5,8}
Heidi Hove Pedersen > Copenhagen, Denmark¹⁴
Sal Randolph > Brooklyn, USA¹⁹
Alia Rayyan > Ramallah, Israel/Palestinian Territories
Jon Rubin > Pittsburgh, USA¹⁷
Iyallola Tillieu > Brussels, Belgium²¹
Keiko Tsuji > Tokyo, Japan¹²
Lee Walton > Greensboro, USA²²
Lindsey White > San Francisco, USA²⁵
Christian Sievers > Berlin, Germany¹³
Zoe Strauss > Philadelphia, USA²³

**DOUBLE FEATURE:
DARRYL NEPINAK
AND JACKIE TRAVERSE**

Art Gallery of
Southwestern Manitoba,
Brandon, Manitoba
Curated by Jenny Western
13 January – 26 February,
2011

BY ANDREW HARWOOD
AND JONAH CORNE

It is tempting to view Double Feature: *Darryl Nepinak and Jackie Traverse*, an exhibition in Brandon, Manitoba, 200 kilometres outside of Winnipeg, as a kind of preview of *Close Encounters: The Next 500 Years*, the art-star-studded spectacular of Indigenous art showing in the city. The peripherally located show, however, is itself a major event.

Darryl Nepinak, from the Saulteaux tribe, works primarily in video. Jackie Traverse, from the Anishinabe tribe, works in several media, including video and painting. Both based in Winnipeg, they use wit, irony and humour to confront immensely devastating subject matter. If the “comic” in their work serves as a form of “relief,” it does not neutralize the repercussions of colonialism, but upsets expectations about “proper” representations of oppression and suffering.

Nepinak’s six videos from 2006 to 2009 comprise his work in *Double Feature*. Each of these videos deconstructs a different genre from movies or television: the morning talk show; the cooking show; the western; the ethnographic documentary; the music video; and coverage of a spelling bee. Nepinak employs a transparently barebones, lo-fi approach, which allows his ideas and concepts to assert themselves with maximum clarity. Watched consecutively, the videos in *Double Feature* strike the viewer almost like a pilot episode of a Native version of *Mad TV* — a comparison to which Nepinak, fond of pop



Darryl Nepinak, *I-N-D-I-A-N* (Still), 2008. Courtesy: Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba.

culture even as he plunders and critiques it, would not likely object.

I-N-D-I-A-N (2008), the spelling bee send-up, is perhaps the program’s most succinctly powerful piece. The two-minute video consists of two identically set up static shots. First, Nepinak appears in front of a microphone dressed in a button-down shirt, nerdishly buttoned to the top, a yellow contestant number slung around his neck. An off-screen authoritative voice asks him to spell the word “Indian,” a seemingly easy task since the contestant is a grown-up and the word isn’t exactly “ichthyology.” Looking perplexed, Nepinak hesitates and asks: “Can I please get the meaning of the word?” “Can I please get the language of origin?” and “Can you use it in a sentence?” Taking a deep breath, Nepinak settles on an answer: “N. D. N.”: a slang

spelling of the word, which the authoritative judge shoots down and “corrects.” Nepinak responds with the quip: “Oh, just like on the Rez.” Characteristically multiplying punch lines, the video cuts to a middle-aged white contestant asked to spell “genocide,” and the piece abruptly ends.

In this deceptively simple video, Nepinak crystallizes how language and education have been used to perpetuate colonialism. The spelling bee is exposed as an exercise in mindless obedience and linguistic coercion. Mistakenly applied to First Nations peoples by Spanish explorers in the 15th century, the word “Indian” might be better spelled “N.D.N.” — a self-chosen identification. *Zwei Indianer Aus Winnipeg* (2009), which screened at the Berlin International Film Festival, takes its name from a 1964 German



<top>Jackie Traverse, *Bats of Lake St. Martin*, *Childhood Memories Series*, 2010. Courtesy: Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba.

<bottom>Jackie Traverse, *Uncle Rudy*, *Childhood Memories Series*, 2010. Courtesy: Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba.



Darryl Nepinak, *Big Foot* (Still), 2007. Courtesy: Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba.

pop song by Marika Kilius, an Olympic medal-winning figure-skater who enjoyed a side-career as a singer in the yé-yé mould. Its title translating as *Two Indians from Winnipeg*, the song is gleefully, nuttily racist — a quality which Nepinak's video basks in and exploits for absurdist effect. Serving as an ersatz music video for the song, the video features two white men masquerading as Indians chasing a beautiful native woman through the streets of downtown Winnipeg. At the end, the two submerge themselves in a lake and re-emerge metamorphosed into what appear to be “authentic” native men. Yet the two newly emerged “Indians” continue to chase the beauty — perhaps demonstrating that men are dogs, and that sometimes gender trumps race.

Issues of identity are explored within a more explicitly autobiographical framework in Jackie Traverse's half of the exhibition, which combines two stop-motion animations, *Two Scoops* (2008) and *Empty* (2009), and her acrylic painting series *Childhood Memories* (2010). Imbued with an emotional depth by their handcrafted elements, the videos focus on narratives involving, respectively, government-enforced foster care and adoption, and an alcoholic mother. Signaling a progression from her videos, Traverse's

paintings rework similar subject matter, but with a more distinctive voice and with added intricacies of humour and irony.

Memory plays a much more active role in her paintings, distorting representation and accentuating the uncertainty of remembrance. Employing the denigrated genre of caricature, considered the domain of cartoonists and carnival portraitists, Traverse's paintings depict figures with oversized heads and exaggerated facial features. These figures are set against backgrounds of swirling brushstrokes, removing the subjects from any realistic context, placing them in a psychic memory-space. Context is conjured by Traverse's casually tacked-up notes, neatly printed in pencil on sheets of loose-leaf paper — suggesting a schoolgirl's notebook. This pre-emptive seizure of control over the conventional gallery card works brilliantly; the notes become part of the total work without impeding the evocativeness of her images.

In her note accompanying *The Bats of Lake St. Martin*, one of the most absorbing paintings of the series, Traverse writes: “This is how I imagined a bat carrying me away. My mom told me that if I didn't wear my hat the bats would grab me by my hair and carry me away to go live with them.” The canvas

shows a little girl, dressed in a fur-cuffed coat, letting out a scream as she is dragged skyward by the swooping creature. In this cautionary myth, fabricated by her mother and vividly imagined by the artist as a child, Traverse returns to the terror of being stripped away from the home depicted in *Two Scoops*. Here, however, it is represented in a much more mythological manner. This is also true of *Uncle Rudy*, a painting of a dour white woman in uniform with a brood of kittens in her arms, based on a story told by Traverse's aunt, who told her that her missing kittens were taken away by children's aid and put in a foster home.

In Traverse's paintings, the oversized heads are constant targets, sites of vulnerability. In *Perms*, the head is attacked not by a malicious bat, but by her mother's questionable good intentions. “When I was in grade 3 my mom gave me and my little sister Pammy Afro perms. I took one look in the mirror and started to cry. Pammy liked hers,” the note to the painting reads in perfect deadpan. Sporting flared jeans, a striped t-shirt, and a giant bowl-like do — typical 70's African-American, Brooklyn style — the artist again pictures herself with a wide-open screaming mouth, distressed at her imposed new identity. As the painting engages this key problem, it is emotionally complicated by the little sister, who smiles while cradling a teddy bear, perhaps naively content with her new 'fro.

Nepinak and Traverse use humour to allow us to enter the stories of their lives. Deeply political, their work is never didactic, relying on powerful emotional cues that mingle hilarity and disquietude. The legacies of colonialism can never be erased, but these artists laugh in the face of hegemony and history.

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ANDREW HARWOOD is a Winnipeg-based artist, writer and curator with a penchant for shiny things.



Rainer Herrn, *Archival images from Sex Brennt/Sex Burns*, 2008. Photo by: Philippe Clairo

DIRTY DEEDS: **POPSEX!**

Curated by Annette Timms and Michael Thomas Taylor
Illingworth Kerr Gallery, ACAD, Calgary, Alberta
6 January – 22 January, 2011

BY AMY FUNG

Inspired by Rainer Herrn's 2008 group exhibition *Sex Brennt/Sex Burns* at The Charité Hospital in Berlin, *PopSex!* showcases 12 artists from Berlin and Calgary. Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz, David Folk, Jean-René Leblanc, Kurtis Lesick, Wednesday Lupypciw, Anthea Black and Mr. and Mrs. Keith Murray, Mireille Perron and Heather Stump, Benny Nemerofsky Ramsay and RICHARD SMOLINSKI were brought together by the curators to respond to the remnants of Magnus Hirshfeld's archive from the Institute for Sexual Science. The exhibition was an extension of a related conference that took place at ACAD, which focused on the role of media and sexuality in early 20th-century Germany, the subject of Hirshfeld's Institute.

Founded in Berlin in 1919, Hirshfeld's Institute for Sexual Science was a place of research, political advocacy, counseling, and public education — decades ahead of what Alfred Kinsey

would go on to accomplish in America in the 1940s and 50s. Inspired by the world's first gay rights organizations, the institute was a close ally for several groups fighting for sexual reform and women's rights. In 1933, during the infamous Nazi book burnings, the bulk of the Institute's archives were destroyed. At the same time, Hirschfeld's scientific research was co-opted and turned around by Nazi Germany to argue for racial and biological purity.

Today, perhaps 5 percent of the overall archive has been reconstructed from donations, some of which are included in this exhibition. Attempting to start an accessible dialogue between historical knowledge and the present day role of sex and media, *PopSex!* exists between the realms of a suggestive, and potentially provocative, art exhibition and a museum display of recovered scientific artifacts.

If the driving force behind *PopSex!* is communicating the history of sex and sexuality within the public sphere, the real question for viewers is whether this exhibition conveys sex beyond an intellectual or academic level. The answer, for the most part, is no, but there are a handful of works within *PopSex!* that suggest possibilities through performative gestures that reimagine a new history of sexuality.

Wednesday Lupypciw's *Under Rugs* is a direct redress of the lack of visibility for prostitutes within Hirschfeld's research. Creating a video narrative about two hustlers starring herself along with her mother, Valerie VanEe, the video follows the two women through a haze of plastic jewelry and personal tragedies, as they navigate beneath a gaudy acrylic hand-hooked rug. Giving body to the metaphor of being swept under the rug, the video and performance also suggests a solidarity in community and lineage, a subtheme in several of the performance works that becomes the ultimate message for *PopSex!*

As a gesture of community building, Mr. and Mrs. Keith Murray and Anthea Black's



Wednesday Lupypciw, *UNDER RUGS*, 2010-2011. Photo by: Artist.

performative collaboration as The Glitter Twins celebrates queerness through a cosmic interdimensional bike ride. Reincarnated as twin trannies, Murray and Black's video and live performance take them through a mystical bike ride as glitter abounds, honouring the memory of ACAD alumnus and activist Jasmine Valentina Herron, who died tragically last fall in a bike accident in New York.

The most affective work falls to Benny Nemerofsky Ramsay, whose latest video, *Legacy*, recontextualizes queerness, wisdom and spirituality through an enchanted quest by a masked young man as he cruises/gets cruised by a network of older and wiser gay men. Continuing Ramsay's critical interpretation of popular and historical texts and music, *Legacy* features American performance artist William Wheeler, Haitian visual artist Jean-Ulrick Désert, Finnish choreographer Tomi Paasonen and French visual artist Rémi Groussin. Projected onto a floating portrait mirror, the work is a poignant reflection and mystical revelation about seeking out the history of queer wisdom, and more specifically, gay male spirituality.

The video draws on a range of sources, including quotes taken from The Second

Radical Faerie Gathering to interviews from Mark Thompson's *Gay Soul*, and the film *An Englishman in New York*. All texts were researched by Nemerofsky Ramsay to inform his concept of the contemporary spiritual queer man, an idea that is as radical and relevant as ever before, but whose momentum has been disconnected from past generations to today. As one of those rare artists who provokes new thoughts while touching your heart, Nemerofsky Ramsay does not shy away from complicating how we understand sex and love through an ever-shifting framework of popular culture.

In general, the works exhibited in *PopSex!* ruminate on the history of sexuality in pop culture. As a contemporary response to historical artifacts, the exhibition is an interesting exercise in how one can expand a lost archive. And as the field of pop culture continues to be redefined through an ever-accessible network of information, the task of archiving the ripples in our histories will become more relevant than ever.

AMY FUNG will be completing an Arts Writing and Curating Fellowship in Scotland for most of 2011. For more information on her writings and projects, visit AmyFung.ca



Jean-René Leblanc, *Trans No.1—No. 5*, 2010. Photo by: Artist.



Michael Dudeck WITCHDOCTOR, *Amygdala*, Photo by: Karen Asher. Courtesy of: The Artist and Pari Nadimi Gallery.

WALLA WALLA BING BANG: MICHAEL DUDECK'S AMYGDALA

Aceartinc
January 15 – February 14, 2011

BY STEVEN LEYDEN COCHRANE

It's difficult to know how to best find meaning or coherence in the work of an artist who, in all apparent seriousness, refers to himself as "Michael Dudeck WITCHDOCTOR." In the case of *Amygdala*, Dudeck's exhibition and "ritual" performance at Winnipeg's Aceartinc., the second work in what is ominously described as "a 10-year project," any attempt to do so raises only further doubt.

Like his moniker, Dudeck's practice and persona trade in a kind of blue-eyed pseudo-shamanism that suggests old colonialist attitudes and a fetish for "primitive" culture, and this seems at first to demand accounting for. After consideration, though, the figure that emerges in *Amygdala*, a sloppy, self-serious affair lacking sufficient purpose to elevate it beyond its myriad clichés, does not really resemble the racist huckster that one expects to encounter in the role of New-Age plastic shaman that Dudeck performs. Rather, he gives the impression only of being both convinced of his own subversive genius and astonishingly tone-deaf — the kind

of oblivious Euro-North-American who not only calls himself "witchdoctor" but presents the name all in capital letters.

Dudeck's *Religion* (the aforementioned 10-year project) centers around an invented mythology that, we're informed, "radically reimagines the nature of human origins" along lines of queer sexuality. In a lengthy introduction to the opening-night "ritual," we learn that the world's human population has, in Dudeck's scheme, divided into male and female "tribes" destined for an apocalyptic military showdown. Glossing over questions of why prehistoric homosexual gender war might be a productive or even an interesting scenario to consider, this exhibition promises a voyeuristic look into the spiritual life of Dudeck's clan of warrior-women (the *Amygdala*, actually one of two small regions in the brain tasked with processing emotion and memory, is also the "sacred text of the female religion," a reading from which constitutes the performance's second half).

If the work's framing suggests a primary focus on Dudeck's sizeable cast of female performers, that promise goes unfulfilled. Nude save for body paint, combat boots, and gasmasks, they slowly and stompily wheel a supine (and similarly naked) gentleman on the gallery's movable scaffolding from the center of the exhibition space to the rear. He is presented to their "goddess," a questionably typecast fertility figure who sits atop a pedestal and whose primary duties seem to be scowling at the crowd and manning the smoke machines. The other women raise knives and bits of antler above their heads, prostrate themselves, and then retreat, victim in tow, back to where they found him, assuming bored poses on the floor in front of a makeshift stage. The goddess, for her part, remains marooned and motionless on her plinth, and the audience mostly ignores her. At this point, the artist himself emerges to mount the stage, and one begins to suspect that the practitioners of the "female religion" were cast mainly as set pieces for Dudeck's own turn in the limelight. Also naked, though equipped with three pairs



Michael Dudeck WITCHDOCTOR, *Amygdala*, Photo by: Karen Asher. Courtesy of: The Artist and Pari Nadimi Gallery.

of prosthetic breasts, he comfortably dominates the scene and the audience's attention, literally towering above the immobile cast of seated women. In his bestial drag, Dudeck sings unintelligibly into his gasmask (this is the "reading," allegedly given in a language of his own construction), fondles his fake breasts and actual genitals, undulates a bit, and then collapses predictably into a fetal position. Throughout this second act, the only other active player (and only participant permitted street clothing) is Dudeck's collaborator, composer and sound artist Andy Rudolph, who pieces together an engrossing but ultimately conventional soundscape from live samples and feedback loops. The ritual over, the bar is reopened; the audience resumes its chatter, and the performers spend the rest of the night reprising their roles as statuary.

If women, *Amygdala*'s ostensible focus, play second fiddle to Dudeck's posturing in the performance, they are less present still in the objects that make up the exhibition. The bulk of these are hasty-looking collage drawings, many featuring photos of Dudeck himself or else magazine cutouts of male models, most emblazoned with heavy-handed, nonsensical pronouncements on violence and religion and shot through with spelling errors ("WEAPONRY IS THE ARTIFICIAL PHALLUS WE CONSTRUCT [.] IT IS REGALIA OF A UTERIS [sic.] SHAMANISM," is one representative passage.) The remaining imagery — guns, knives, bullseyes, and nipples — are such familiar shorthand for "edginess" as to recede

from thought completely. Also on view are a pair of plastic skulls, positioned as to invite comparison: one is perhaps a wolf, the other an elongated human cranium. Frightful though head-binding may seem, the conflation here of cultures that practice it with animals, much like Dudeck's woman/bitch prostheses, demonstrates questionable judgment and contributes little. Audiences will either find *Amygdala* culturally insensitive or they will not — Dudeck's past work has cribbed explicitly from indigenous cultures, and this is mostly, mercifully not the case here — just as they will or will not suspect an underlying misogyny. What remains is the fact that, in times of upheaval, white people have retreated into erotic fantasies of non-industrialized cultures for longer than anyone can remember: 19th-century Post-Impressionists, World-War-I-era Dadaists, the hippies and neo-avant-gardists of the 1960s — all extensively mapped territory that Dudeck behaves as though he's just discovered. He finds himself late to the trend's most recent incarnation, growing since 9/11 throughout the West, which has, for better or worse, been championed by artists possessing far greater self-awareness and humor. Even exhausted tropes may be repackaged compellingly: *Amygdala*, leveraging all of its pretensions, its nudity and built-in controversies, manages to be at best uncomfortable viewing, at worst merely boring.

STEVEN LEYDEN COCHRANE is an emerging artist and educator from Tampa, Florida. He currently lives and works in Winnipeg.

Sinéad Bhreathnach-Cashell, *You Can Be A Diamond*, 2010. Photographer: Jordan Hutchings.

BRIDGING CONTEXTS

Crossings/Traversée Ottawa to Belfast, 2010.

REVIEW BY JULIE FIALA

Described as a “Performance Art Exchange,” [1] *Crossings/Traversées* unfolded in two instalments: the first, in Ottawa, hosted by Galerie SAW Gallery from 17 – 20 June 2010; the second, in Belfast, hosted by the artist collective Bbeyond from 28 – 30 October 2010. Bbeyond supports performance art in Northern Ireland and creates opportunities for international projects such as this one. [2]

Curated by Christine Conley, *Crossings* covered a program of performance art and discussion, which included a workshop component in Ottawa. The program sought to bring artists from Belfast together with First Nations artists. The core artists were Bbeyond members Alastair MacLennan, Sandra Johnston and Sinéad Bhreathnach-Cashell, representing three generations of artists based in Belfast, and Aboriginal artists Jackson 2bears (Kanien’kehaka (Mohawk)), Maria Hupfield (Anishnaabe (Ojibway)) and Skeena Reece (Tsimshian/Gitksan and Cree). In Belfast, the program was expanded to include Bbeyond artists Chrissie Cadman, Elvira Santamaria, and the duo of Paul Stapleton and Caroline Pugh. Both installments included contributions by Aboriginal sociologist of art, Guy Sioui Durand.

As conveyed by Conley in the project booklet, the program’s curatorial premise was to provide a framework to explore issues relating to “the legacies of colonialism” and “political conflict.” A peripatetic Canadian now living in Belfast, I was fortunate to participate in the two-day workshop and to have attended the parallel program in both countries.

In Canada, the last major violent crisis between Aboriginal peoples and the State could arguably be Oka, just over 20 years ago, which saw a summer of armed conflict between the Mohawks and Québec and Canadian police forces. In Northern Ireland, the period known as the Troubles (1968–1998) has had lingering effects and continued impact on the country’s

socio-political landscape. The tension and violence are very real and continue to pose an immediate threat to everyday peace and the coexistence of identities drawn (although imperfectly) along Unionist (Protestant) / Nationalist (Catholic) lines. It manifestly affects lives on the streets today in the form of bombs like those defused on the Antrim Road in North Belfast in late January 2010.

This immediate sense of violence is most poignantly felt in Bbeyond’s Sandra Johnston’s second performance, which took place within the basement vault in Arts Court, Ottawa. Johnston held a fist full of wooden drumsticks in either hand, and the work culminated when she repeatedly struck her thighs with brutal and intensifying force. As the blows intensified, Johnston could no longer hold onto the sticks, which gradually fell from her grasp, bringing the performance to a close. As Johnston explained during the closing round-table discussion, held in Belfast, she inflicted the pain onto her body as a punishment for not being at home when the results of the Saville Report were delivered on 15 June 2010. It unequivocally blamed the British army for the Bloody Sunday massacre. Although this is an extreme example, Johnston’s performance is indicative of the physicality of presence in many of Bbeyond’s performances. In my mind, this is not as evident in the performances by the featured Aboriginal artists, whose temporal relationship to conflict is different.

In both Club Saw in Ottawa and Catalyst Arts in Belfast, Jackson 2bears successfully used scratch video performance to remix and deconstruct media and film stereotyping “the Indian” as a means of reclaiming the representations. Archival footage of cowboys and Indians is interrupted by current examples of Native self-representation (including clips of the hip-hop group War Party and of anti-Olympic protest). On an expanse of grass in front of the War Museum in Ottawa and at the Cornmarket in Belfast’s city centre, Maria Hupfield emerged from a pod in a silver spacesuit as lady moonrider, which, as she explained in the Belfast round-table,

defies ideas of native woman as desired Indian princess or desexualised squaw. Skeena Reece’s *Prayer for Arrival* incorporated song, séance, prayer and native ritual. The work began in Ottawa at an Irish Pub, D’Arcy McGee’s, and migrated to a room at the Château Laurier, to finish in October at the Belfast Harbour Office, near the docklands where the Titanic was built. As part of the performance, Reece explained that she is retracing (although in reverse) the voyage of Charles Melville Hays, who died on the Titanic en route to Ottawa for the opening of the Château Laurier, which he had commissioned. As the President of the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway, Hays had a keen interest in developing a railroad from Prince Rupert, the home of Reece’s people.

These Aboriginal artists addressed the psychic violence caused by historical amnesia, posing alternative narratives and deconstructing historical myths that propagate discrimination. Could this contrast to Bbeyond’s physicality of presence relate to a temporal and generational distancing from experiences of immediate conflict? 2bears, Hupfield and Reece, who were born in the mid-1970s and are now in their 30s, likely re-member (and “piece together”) the deep historical violence through their parents, grandparents or elders, who, for example, were the last generations to be subjected to the atrocities of the residential school system. Johnston (who, now in her 40s, has spent most of her life in Northern Ireland) and MacLennan (who moved to Belfast in 1975 in his 30s to teach at Ulster Polytechnic) would have witnessed, as adults, the intense violence of the Troubles.

Jean-Luc Nancy’s rethinking of the workings of community as “inoperative,” highlights how the concept of community itself is illusionary insofar as it presupposes a coherence that is essentialist. [3] As a conceptual framework, even though *Crossings* could be deemed to invoke such a coherence — as a community conceptualized along colonial/conflict lines — what I find interesting is how the actual performances could be con-

Skeena Reece, *Prayer for Arrival*, 2010. Photographer: Jordan Hutchings.

sidered to expose the limits of community, because we are confronted with as many disjunctions as we are with points of similitude.

However, I would argue that the two-day workshop led by Alastair MacLennan was a critical part of *Crossings* because it presented

opportunities for being together, a “crossing into others” beyond the conceptual limits of community. The workshop encouraged the participants, 13 local performance artists (which unfortunately did not include 2bears, Hupfield, Reece or Bbeyond’s Johnston and Bhreathnach-Cashell), to mind the



Maria Hupfield, *Lady Moonrider: Time Traveler*, 2010. Photographer: Jordan Hutchings.

Alastair MacLennan, *STUD DUST*, 2010. Photographer: Jordan Hutchings.

discrepancy between the conceptual and the actual. As important (and necessary) as the careful crafting of our performances might be, MacLennan suggests that what is crucial is our ability to adapt to the actual performance situation with all its contingencies. (The responsiveness to context can be witnessed throughout Bbeyond's work.) This is also a call to be fully present: an invitation for us as performers to recognise our selves in continual transition — from the subtle movements of our bodies to the wanderings of our minds. In recognising this transitioning, we gain a self-awareness that brings us closer to being fully human, fully actualized. As MacLennan has explained, "It's a question of how integrated the individual seems to be with the action and the activity, so that you lose a sense of whether the person is doing the action or whether the action is doing the person." [4] On the final day, the group actualized these principles through a performance at Confederation Park in Ottawa. Blindfolded, we moved together as a single organism, connected by bamboo sticks that required us to communicate through subtle shifts of pressure. This was a poetic, shared experience of actualizing community.

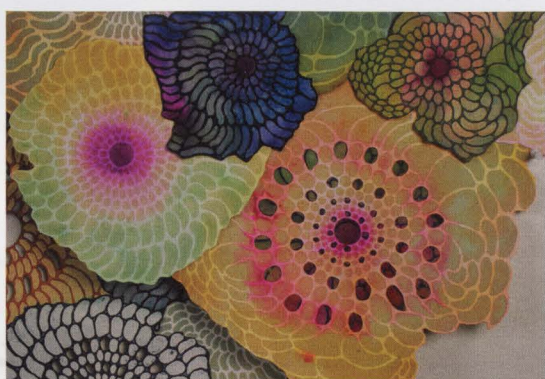
Crossings was meant to create a bridge for cross-cultural and -contextual exchange. It succeeded in enabling a shared platform and some parallels between the artists' relationships to conflict and

colonialism across distinct geo-temporal-political contexts. In many ways, the workshop (like the round-table discussions and social gatherings outside the main program) may have provided opportunities for a type of collaborative exchange that did not happen in the main body of the program. For example, what would it have meant for the performers to work responsively with one another in an attempt to share more than a thematic framework?

JULIE FIALA is an artist and PhD candidate in Art History at Queen's University, Canada. She is currently a visiting student at Trinity College Dublin in Belfast.

Notes:

- [1] Exhibition booklet. Christine Conley, *Crossings / Traversées* (Ottawa: Gallerie SAW Gallery, 2010).
- [2] For more on Bbeyond see the catalogue *PANI: Performance Art Northern Ireland* (Belfast: Bbeyond, 2010).
- [3] Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, ed. by Peter Connor, trans. by Peter Connor, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holland, and Simona Sawhney (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).
- [4] Alastair MacLennan interviewed by Robert Ayers, *Nothing Is — listening to Alastair MacLennan*, Live Art Letters 5, Feb 2000, p. 4.



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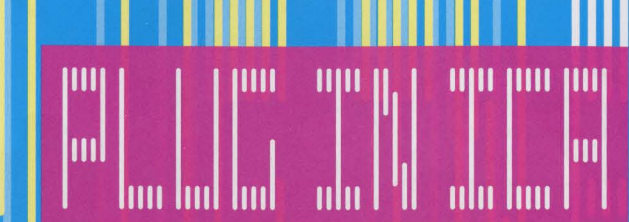
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Image: Meredith Setser, *Barrier Modular Home* (detail), etching on Hahnemühle copperplate paper, 10' x 52', 2010, created under the auspices of the of the Open Studio Visiting Artists Program 2010 - 2011

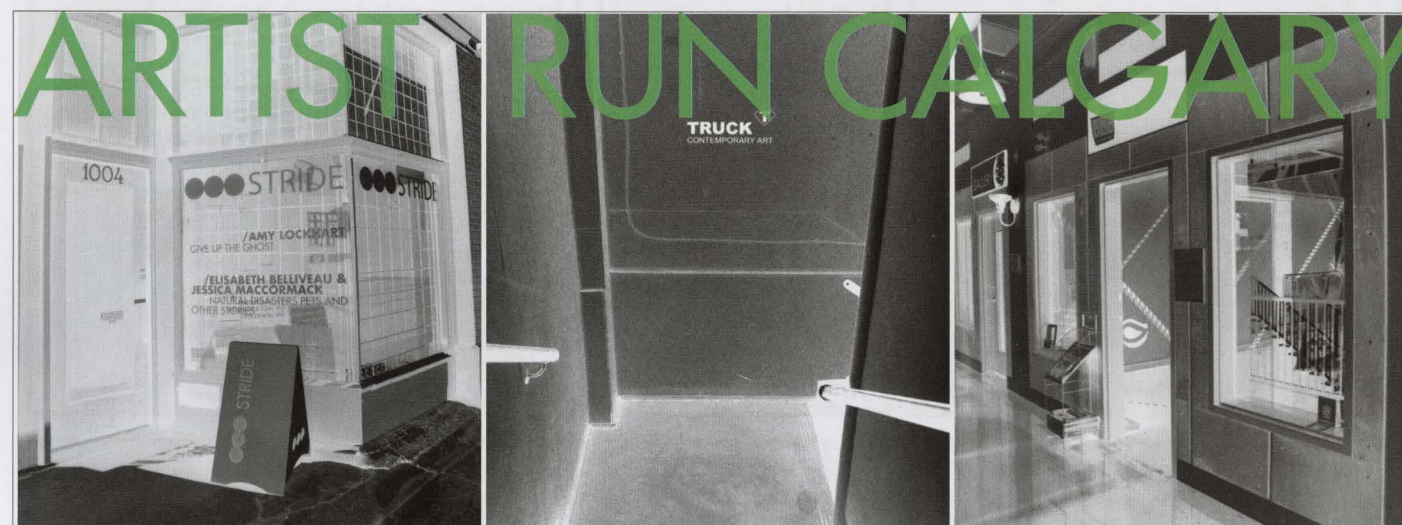


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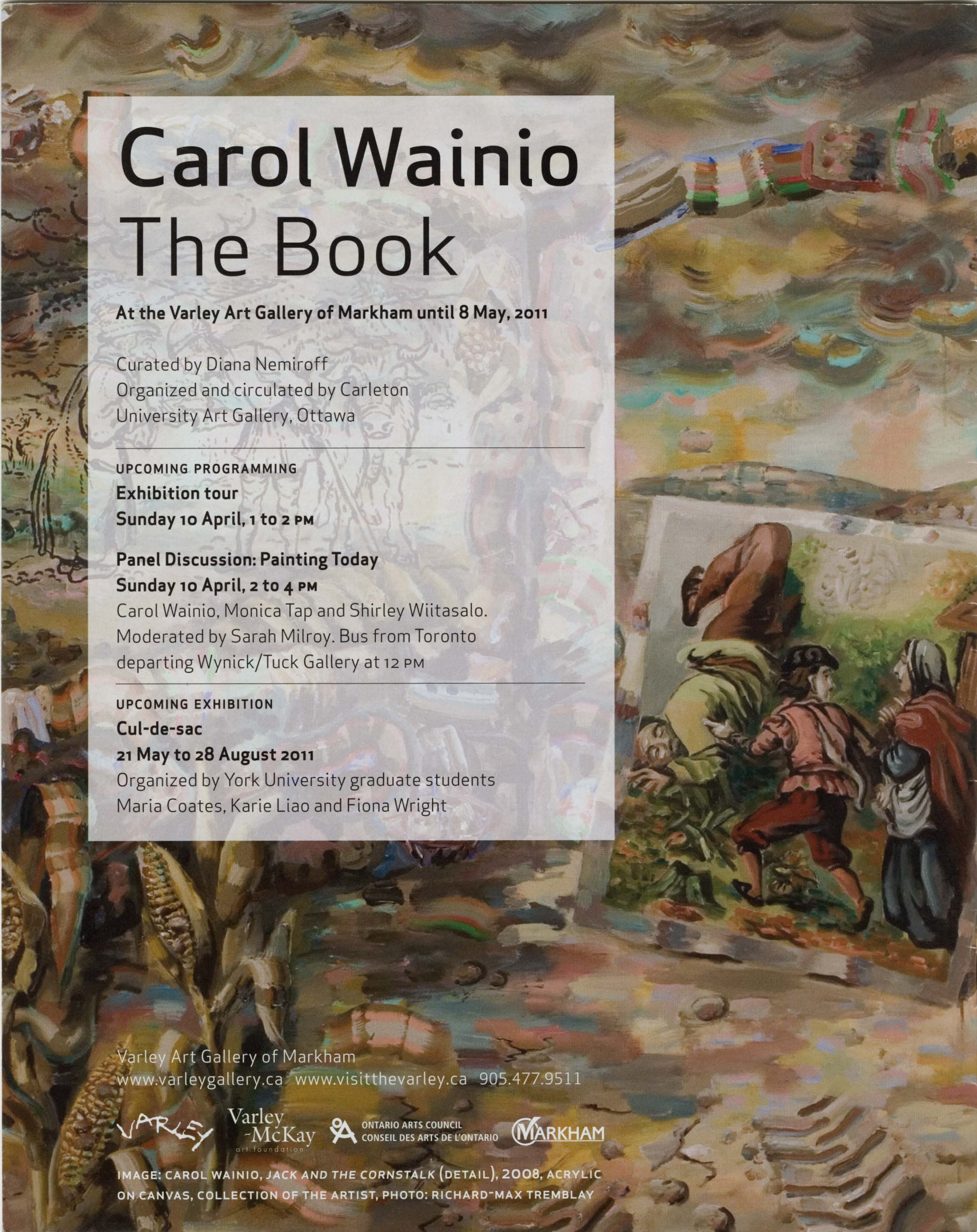


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IMAGE: CAROL WAINIO, JACK AND THE CORNSTALK (DETAIL), 2008, ACRYLIC
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