Discussions: 
Art & Criticism in the Eighties

Because Toronto would not go to the mountain, Parachute brought the conference to Shadows. Speakers at the conference magazine had to bring the three-day conference on art and criticism to the city. (Art, March 16-18) to the communications capitol of Canada, so that the people there, because that is where you come to talk. The double-blind of the art world is that you have heard one thereby confirms that Toronto is where everything happens.

Yet it would be an extraordinary reduction to describe this conference as a conflict between two cities: Montreal busily assimilating post-structuralist discourse from France, Toronto lobbying for a country where "art" is spelt with a capital A. Even if this describes the difference between Laman, of Parachute magazine and Richard Rhodes, Toronto-based editor of the new C$ art magazine, there were many other voices, many other discussions.

Indeed, it seemed that Richard Rhodes had a rough time of it. The highlights of the three days of discussion can be described in terms of the trace or shadow that is the beloved of the post-structuralists, or in terms of an ongoing activity or practice. The first neo-expressionist painting seen by John Scott was spray-painted on a Detroit store window and it survived three minutes until the glass was smashed by a rock or a bullet. The first slide shown at this conference was a lingering gay pornographic image by Tim Guest. My own memory is the sharp detail of a Benjamin Buchholz. It seemed to embrace what he had to say. These are the shadowy days of the conference. The conference repeatedly described our situation as unheroic, post-feminist and beyond revolutionary politics. The voices of activity seemed not to believe this. These voices are local and women's voices. John Bentz and Philips-Monk want a local and historical art criticism about the city of Toronto. And yet another male-dominated panel took the stage on the third day of the conference an anonymous woman's voice said, "It's another boys' club."

Inspite of de Duve's denial (that he intends to raise a new universalism, it is difficult to see how such a project could ever meet with the same local art-critical discourse called for by John Bentley Mays and Philip Monk. Recent art in Toronto, said Mays, operates to create a pseudo-community among artists, dealers and collectors, built around the idea of the artist as victim. We must denomsympify artists' transnational protest about desire and subjectivity. A proper historical question might be: what are the porportions in Toronto that artists feel victimized? The answer, suggests Mays, is that Toronto is not the most authoritarian civic structure in North America. At the centre of Canadian information networks, the city of Toronto is enclosed in rigid authority structures. In attempting to develop a local criticism for this centre of power, a weak and discredited language of criticism may be most available. Mays suggested two possibilities: the critique of a culture of information developed within the academic canon, and a fictional criticism drawing on the bourgeois novel. For example, he presented the weight of discourse to the city and the city in the novels of Dickens. This example may provide a format for a local, historical criticism. Mays is himself writing, apart from his work for The Globe and Mail, such a fictional criticism.

The first slide of the conference was shown at the end of day one by Tim Guest. From the first four exhibitions which he organized at A Space in 1983 on the theme of "Sex and Representation," the image was one of those slightly absurd classical Greek figures beautifully photographed a century ago by de Glaen. Someone said that it was refreshing to see an image at last. What no one said in this image at an international conference on recent art practice, still had the effect of a shock, as challenged, as did the exhibition it came from, the taboo on gay imagery in Toronto. So small is the order in the cottage-industry period of homosexual pornography, de Glaen's vaguely classical imagery remained an important prototype of gay porn until the 1960s. Describing viewers' reactions to the exhibition, Guest said that different responses to the same work are often caused by the social order rather than about the amorous soul. It says something about the social construction of sexual representations that straight men were indifferent or worse, women found the photographs cold and forbidding (women's sexualization is sexuality is surrounded by warnings and prohibitions), while gay men recognized the imagery even if they had never heard of the name de Glaen. Commenting that this show, and the three other "Sex and Representation exhibitions, seemed to have little direct effect on debates in the women's movement, the gay movement, or the Toronto art scene, Guest suggested that that may have been because he offered context instead of immediate answers.

One sensed that Guest's presentation and later John Scott's description of his politics in art were heard and then promptly marginalized. Scott said that his primary identity was not a painter. He had intended in the 1970's to be a Marxist theoretician of culture and the ideological. In those days he had to be a theoretician. He turned to art as a way of getting attention for what he wanted to say. A successful painting, like his recent cruise missile image, is one that is used in newspapers and as wallpaper.